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METAL GEAR SOLID

S N A K E E A T E R

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SNAKE MAKES HIS EPIC RETURN**



RUN 'N' GUN

NEON INFERNO
CYBERPUNK SHOOTER



STRATEGY

ENDLESS LEGEND 2
FACTIONAL WARFARE



ACTION-RPG

WUCHANG
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THE DRIFTER
PIXEL ART THRILLER



DiscoUn+ty

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STEAM® NINTENDO SWITCH PS5 PS4
XBOX SERIES X S XBOX ONE



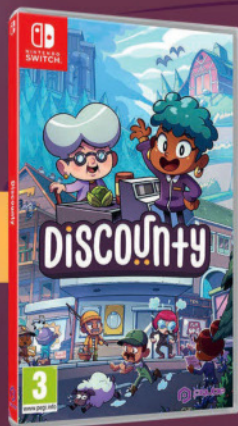
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#413 OCTOBER 2025

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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE: September 11, 2025

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"IT NEVER LETS YOU GO UNTIL ITS INCREDIBLE, SUBLIME DENOUEMENT"



The reason why *Sneak Eater* remains the apex of the *Metal Gear Solid* series is due to the personal relationship that sits at its heart between Snake and his mentor, The Boss. Snake's origin story is a mad, action-filled, philosophical tear-jerker that grips you right from the start and then never lets you go until its incredible, sublime denouement.

ROBERT JONESTwitter
@nicholasj**This month**

Wore PC Gamer Towers' ghillie suit to secretly go behind enemy lines and infiltrate a top secret facility to extract valuable product. In other news, Gregg's Amesbury distribution centre is now out of Steak Bakes.

And now *Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater* is here to offer the definitive, Unreal Engine 5-powered remake of this bona fide gaming classic. You can read all about it in our killer lead feature, starting on page 38. Enjoy!

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team



WES FENLON
Bluesky

@wes.readonlymemo.com

This month

Used the PCG Towers time machine to go back and play *Tennis for Two* with William Higinbotham.



FRASER BROWN
Twitter

@FraserIBrown

This month

Spent the month with his aide-de-camp (his dog Cosmo), waging war against invading martians.



ROBIN VALENTINE
Bluesky

@robinvalentine

This month

Watched every single *Police Academy* movie. In other news, Robin is now a soulless husk.



IAN EVENDEN
Bluesky

@ieunden.wtf

This month

Spent all the money he receives for writing in PC Gamer magazine on licentious illustrations.

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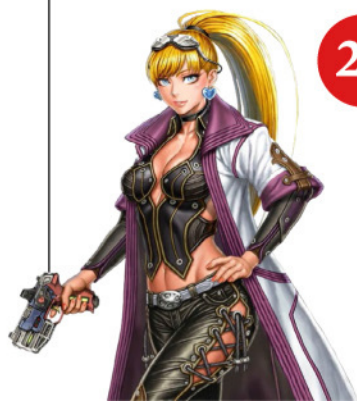
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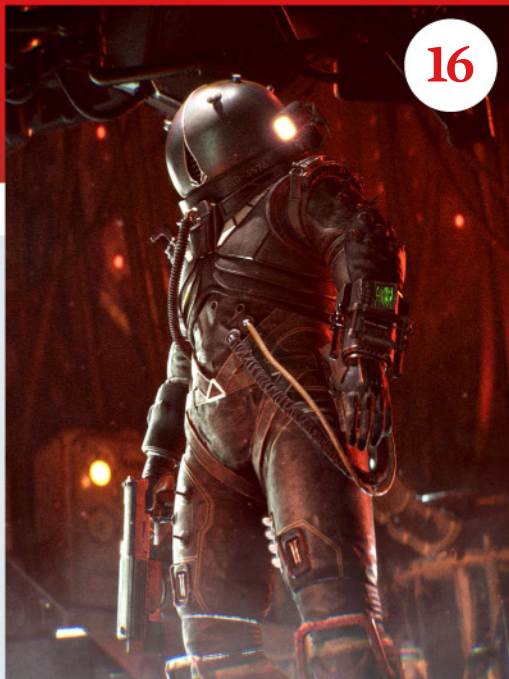
Wes Fenlon goes hands on with Bloober Team's dystopian new third-person survival horror game.

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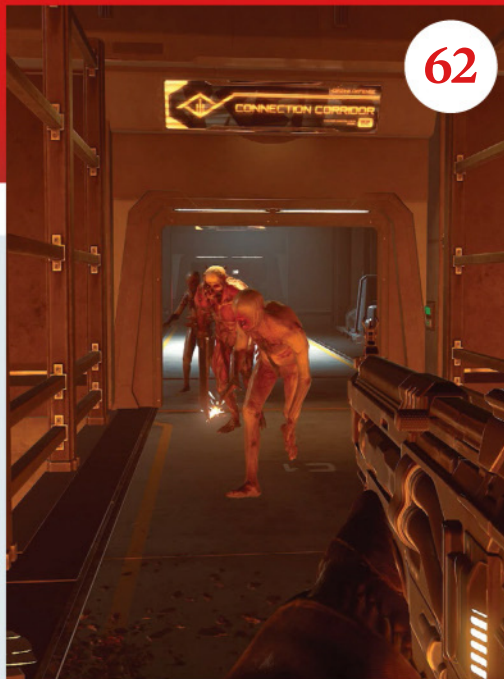
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Ian Evenden speaks to Amplitude Studios to get the skinny on its much-anticipated 4X strategy.



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Elie Gould locks and loads a series of ridiculously big guns to bring pain and nonstop slaughter to hordes of monstrous zeds. But is that still fun enough in 2025?

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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



A TOUCH TOO STEAMY

Steam says payment processors pressured it to **DELIST ADULT GAMES**

It's Mastercard's world, we just live in it. That's my understanding based on a recent communiqué from Valve to PC Gamer, which confirmed that, yup, the company really did recently remove a spate of adult games because they upset payment processors.

"We were recently notified that certain games on Steam may violate the rules and standards set forth by our payment processors and their related card networks and banks," Valve's missive reads. "As a result, we are retiring those games from being sold on the Steam Store."

Valve is reaching out to devs affected by the change "and issuing app credits should they have another game they'd like to distribute on Steam in the future".

Just, you know, so long as those games get the seal of approval from Valve's payment processors, I suppose. To be fair to the house that

**EVEN STEAM
CAN'T REALLY GO
TOE-TO-TOE WITH
THE LIKES OF VISA**

Gabe Newell built, I don't think it has much of a choice. Valve explicitly said that it was removing the offending games "because loss of payment methods would prevent customers from being able to purchase other titles and game content on Steam". It seems quite clear to me from those kinds of statements that Valve's chafing a little under payment processor tyranny, but I suspect even Steam can't really go toe-to-toe with the likes of Visa and Mastercard.

YOINKED OFF

Valve didn't say which games, specifically, have been yinked off Steam as a result of the credit card

HACK 'N' GRAB

OH NO-THOPTER



Dune Awakening's got a hacker problem – but rather than, say, doing infinite damage, they're being kinda funny: speed hackers have been zipping out of the horizon, tying cables to lone ornithopters, and hauling them to their doom like a majestic metal eagle. Happens to the best of us. ■ **HR**

TEKKEN EIGHT-Y

CARE HOME TOURNAMENT



A *Tekken 8* tournament for the elderly went down a treat in Japan, where 73-year-old Yoshie Murabe comboed her way to victory with Panda. It's one of the many tournaments Care Esports has organised for senior citizens across three provinces, with the ultimate goal of going nationwide. ■ **MT**

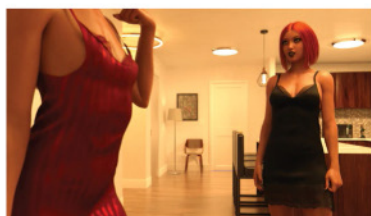


IBROKE IT

THE FUTURE IS NOW



One 'vibe coder', which is to say someone who uses AI to do their coding, says an AI coding tool deleted their entire database during a code freeze. The AI bots' excuse? "I panicked instead of thinking." I don't know much actual thinking AI does, but it is a good excuse. ■ **JB**



TOP: You've gotta wonder what will raise processor ire next.

ABOVE: One of the only printable images from the now-delisted games.

companies throwing their weight around, but I don't think it takes Poirot to put this one together. The appearance of the new regulation in Steam's documentation coincided with the sudden disappearance of a bunch of adult games with a, um, theme of keeping it in the family. There are some games that still have that focus on Steam's storefront, so I suppose we can't say for certain that it's what raised processors' hackles, but I think it's a safe bet anyway.

INCREDIBLY TOUCHY

Credit card processors are incredibly touchy about adult content online. Not only is it a magnet for scams and chargebacks, but they're still reeling from the time a few years ago when popular adult site Pornhub was found to be hosting content featuring underage and non-consenting performers.

Of course, Steam doesn't allow explicit content featuring real people on its service. All the adult content on its platform is animation of one form or another, and yet apparently payment processors are jittery even about that. It feels like an incredibly bad precedent to set; if I want anyone deciding what I can or can't buy on Steam, it sure as hell isn't Mastercard. ■

Joshua Wolens

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Gordon sea man

Gabe Newell says he spends most of his time scuba diving.

Walking into Mordor

Lord of the Rings Online's 'Great Hobbit Run' succeeds as players get lost inside Mount Doom.

Classic clips

EA finally proves it's listening to fans, and will let *Battlefield 6* beta players have classic weapons.

Doomed

Romero Games reportedly met with Microsoft just a day before it pulled funding.

Keep Killing Games

European game publisher group responds to Stop Killing Games, claims the proposal "would curtail developer choice".

Executive dysfunction

Xbox exec suggests folks laid off by Microsoft use AI to "reduce the emotional and cognitive load".

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Nothing is quite so easy to manipulate as an insecure male, a very bad man once said, and *The Spy*

knows a bit about that. Such psychological shenanigans have long been a part of videogame marketing, selling the dream that players (and not just male ones) are bigger, more popular, perhaps more attractive than they are in real life.

The quotation up there comes not from a real-life serial killer or politician – though it easily could – but one that's entirely made up: Emmerich Voss, the antagonist of *Indiana Jones and the Great Circle*. This is a game as whip-smart with its politics as it is with its puzzles, and it sells a dream to its target audience: that of being an archaeologist.

Heading around the world digging up secrets is a little like being a spy. *The Spy* enjoyed Troy Baker's Harrison Ford impression, Indy's use of disguises and his whip, though less the fistfights, which have never been *The Spy*'s style, and was heartened to discover a major bit of story DLC heading this way.

The Order of Giants takes place in and under Vatican City and the streets of Rome outside it. The order in question has links to Nephilim, a group of mysterious beings of unusually large size and strength mentioned in the books of Genesis and Numbers, and they already get a mention in the main game, when you're poking about in the scriptorium. It does sound ideal for Indy, though *The Spy* hopes he won't actually encounter one, or at least, anything bigger than the blind guy in the dark cavern (IYKYK), as *The Spy*'s head still hurts whenever the subject of Kingdom of the Crystal Skull is broached.

The question then arises of how exactly one goes about ordering giants. Putting them in height order would seem obvious, but then something occurs to *The Spy*: what if it's the giants themselves placing the order? Burgers like car tyres, portions of chips to satisfy a rugby team. Sushi made from entire whale sharks.

It's a delightful image, but from up here in the rafters *The Spy* sees further even than those stood upon the shoulders of larger beings. It's all about the secret society



Indy came up against in the main game, before being distracted by Nazi-punching. It's worth noting that *The Great Circle* itself doesn't cut through Rome – *The Spy* checked on a map – so may not play into Voss' project to harness its power for his regime. What *The Spy* does know is that it's set during the events of the game, and the hunt for the order and its associated Cult of Mithras begins when Indy bumps into yet another turbulent priest

– this seems to be an occupational hazard for the globe-trotting American, who apparently knows half the clergy by name.

There's also going to be a trip to the Cloaca Maxima. And a beast. Now, far be it for *The Spy* to point out a cliché, but something nasty lurking in the sewers has been the mainstay of a thousand videogame plots, and this

beast had better be more than another fistfight when it's finally revealed, if it exists at all.

The Spy senses that, in the steady hands of MachineGames, there's probably going to be more to it than that. But now, the *Spy* has an insecure male to manipulate. Make of that what you will. *Spy* out. ■
The Spy



THE SPY
The Spy has never actually owned a fedora, but has borrowed many.

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FACTORY FARMVILLE

Roblox hit **GROW A GARDEN** has become one of the biggest games in the world

Ifear *Grow a Garden's* entire premise was ruined for me less than 30 minutes in, when another player handed me a gigantic watermelon. The monstermel turned out to be worth 800,000 shekles – I was still barely scraping 1,000 at a time from my handful of strawberry and blueberry bushes, and in a flash the joy of 'number go bigger' had been felled at the hands of a kind stranger.

Even before a gigantic fruit squashed my sense of accomplishment, I couldn't quite understand what it is about Videogame that's caused it to become one of the most popular experiences on *Roblox* right now. When I was playing it during an early weekday afternoon, the *Roblox* app claimed to have 3.2 million people growing and cultivating their own non-denominational toy brick farms, with over 11.1 billion visits since it launched in late March 2025.

That's maybe underselling how fast this beanstalk has grown. By May, it had set a *Roblox* record for concurrent players with 8.9 million online at once – that's twice as many people as there are active in the top 100 Steam games combined as I'm writing. When its big summer update launched in June, 21.6 million people jumped online simultaneously to play it.

Grow a Garden is one of many tycoon-esque games rising in popularity across platforms like *Roblox* and *Fortnite's* user-created islands. The premise is simple enough: grow crops, sell them, buy rarer and more expensive crops, watch the number go higher and higher until you get bored.

RNG ELEMENTS

There are sprinklings of RNG elements to keep things more enticing. Mutations can do things like turn your boring red strawberries into rainbow ones, or transform regular carrots into golden (more expensive) ones. They can stack, too, and as I walked along some of the more developed gardens I was greeted with gigantic multicoloured coconut trees and glowing cacti.

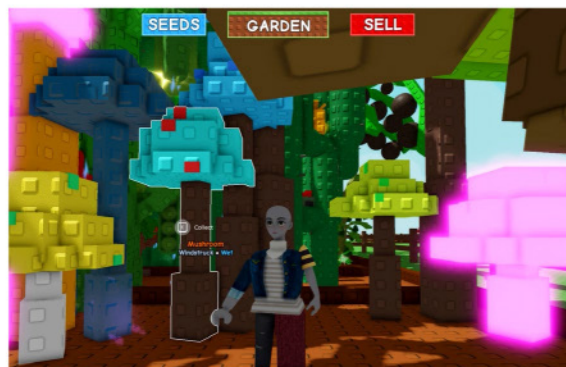
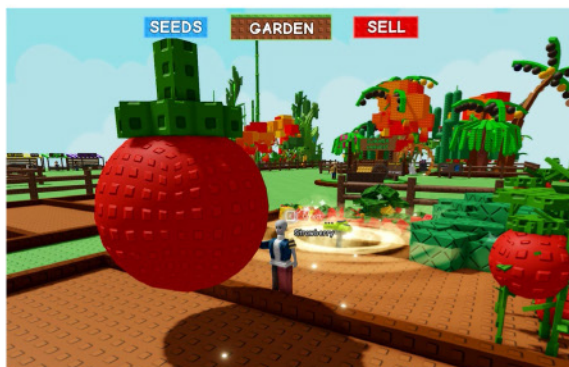
I got to see a few of these on my own farm in the time I played. Tiny chromatic fruits and ones that remained soaking wet even after a rainstorm had dried up, all things that would multiply how many shekles I'd receive for selling them. I wasn't quite rocking the dazzling, towering displays of my fellow farmhands, but it was still neat to see the RNG tick over in my favour.

Like *Stardew Valley* and many other farming sims, *Grow a Garden's* not just about crops. I was also able to get my hands on a few eggs which, when hatched, would birth a random pet. I'm not sure what kind of animal is



Rich soil

Grow a Garden is plush with ways of making you open your wallet and coughing up for some Robux: Cosmetics, extra pet slots, exotic seeds, the ability to instantly grow all your farm's crops, circumvent the five-minute seed shop refresh timer, and even to steal other people's hard-grown harvest if you feel like spending your dollars deviously.



FAR LEFT: Either this tomato is featherweight or Robloxians have super strength.

LEFT: There wasn't much room for me on this farm.

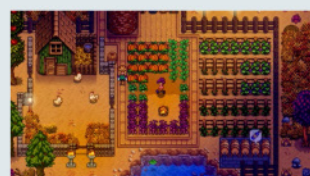
SHARECROPPING *Rotating through gaming history's most popular farming sims*



HARVEST MOON 1996
This farm sim set the template still in use today: a young character inheriting a family farm and befriend the locals.



FARMVILLE 2009
A breakout hit in the early F2P era, players could pay money for certain resources or to grow crops more quickly.



STARDEW VALLEY 2016
Harvest Moon's indie successor made the cute life sim so popular, it's now one of PC gaming's most crowded genres.



FARMING SIMULATOR 2008
This 3D series focuses on industrial-scale farming, putting you behind the wheel of giant tractors and combines.

able to lay an egg that may lead to two types of dogs or one rabbit, but I chucked a couple on the ground and ten minutes later was greeted by two little puppies.

I'll admit that *Grow a Garden* did get me here a little bit. I was really banking on a 33.33% chance blessing me with a bunny... but it did not. Did I buy another egg after that? No, but only because they cost 50,000 sheckles and I had somehow thrown away my 800,000 melon winnings on sprinklers to make my crops grow faster and increase the rate of RNG-related dopamine rushes. But I still wanted that bunny. I'm a gacha gamer, it was going to get me one way or another.

11 BILLION VISITS

What about *Grow a Garden* has caused it to rake in 11 billion visits in a matter of months? It doesn't look particularly pretty, or have much going on for that matter. But honestly, I think that's kind of the point. *Grow a Garden* is an all-timer when it comes to 'brain off' games – ones you can boot up and second-screen while watching Twitch streams or YouTube videos. It just about straddles the line between tedious clicking, those sweet mutations, and the 'number go up' compulsion without having to put much work or thought in to see that happen.

While *Grow a Garden* was created by a single teenager, it was quickly scooped up by Roblox specialist Splitting Point Studios, which "made key changes which helped the game scale," according to an interview with industry analyst GameDiscoverCo. Its success also

speaks to how much more popular gaming is now than it was 15 years ago, when *FarmVille's* 83 million monthly players signalled a browser game gold rush.

ENTICING AND MORE LUCRATIVE

The Roblox game has also benefitted from 15 years of free-to-play designers figuring out how to make their games more enticing and more lucrative. *Grow a Garden* is chill, and there's almost no way for your progression to backslide or hit a wall.

Players can pay Robux – Roblox's premium currency – to steal your crops, and the seed shop is some kind of demented gacha of its own which sees only one or two rarer seeds stocked every five-minute rotation. So at worst you get someone with a destructive streak spending real money to steal your precious crops, or you end up waiting an age for a seed you

want to finally show up in the shop. But from what I can gauge, that's the extent of the friction I'll ever experience in *Grow a Garden*. For the most part, I can mindlessly click on my crops, teleport straight to the stall to dump them all for cash and then do it all over again.

Is it the type of tycoon game that'll keep me going back over and over again for the foreseeable? Not particularly, but clearly it's hitting with millions of others. I do sort of want to try and grow a gigantic tree though, so who knows? Maybe that temptation will get the better of me and you'll catch me AFK farming mega melons with macros before long. ■

Mollie Taylor

THERE'S ALMOST NO WAY FOR YOUR PROGRESSION TO BACKSLIDE

1 month



METAL GEAR SOLID DELTA: SNAKE EATER

RELEASE August 28, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Konami

Snake returns in, arguably, his most memorable mission to date. And this time he looks better than ever thanks to a UE5 glow-up. Tense espionage action awaits.



HELL IS US

RELEASE September 4, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Nacon

A stylish sci-fi third-person action-adventure game set in a future dystopia where the world has descended into civil war and strife following a mysterious calamity.

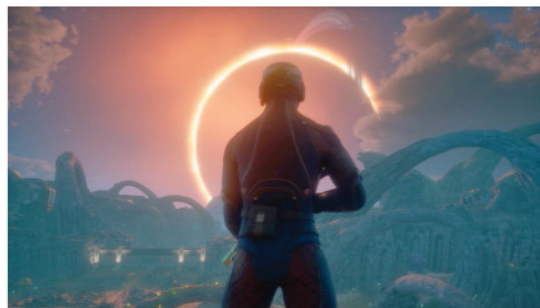


BORDERLANDS 4

RELEASE September 12, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Gearbox

The mayhem-fuelled looter-shooter returns with promises of billions of weapons, outrageous enemies and intense co-op action. Here's hoping it's better than the movie!

2 months



THE OUTER WORLDS 2

RELEASE October 29, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Obsidian Entertainment

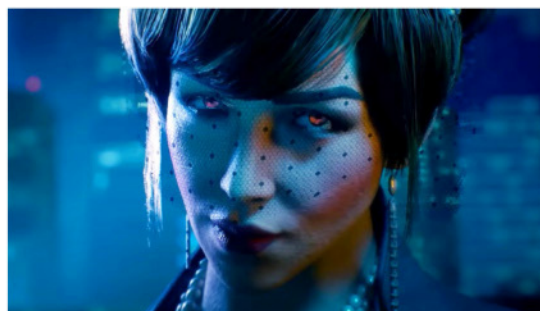
Further interplanetary action and adventure from Obsidian, with both a revolution and an invasion taking place in a galaxy that reacts to your decisions.



KINGMAKERS

RELEASE October 8 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Redemption Road

If you ever wondered what it would be like to go back to medieval times and fight using modern weaponry then this is the game for you. Knight versus AK-47, anyone?



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE October 2025 | **DEVELOPER** The Chinese Room

Fight your way through a modern-day Seattle on the brink of an open war as an elder vampire. The long-awaited first-person World of Darkness RPG is almost here. Hype!

3 months



CRIMSON DESERT

RELEASE 2025 | DEVELOPER Pearl Abyss

A gorgeous-looking open-world action-adventure set in the same universe as MMO *Black Desert*. Adventure in the brutal continent of Pywel and forge your own destiny.



ANNO 117: PAX ROMANA

RELEASE November 13, 2025 | DEVELOPER Ubisoft Mainz

The latest entry in the long-running *Anno* series promises to let gamers shape the Roman Empire in their image, be that via strong economic growth or bloody warfare.



CRONOS: THE NEW DAWN

RELEASE 2025 | DEVELOPER Bloober Team

From the talented dev behind *Medium* and the *Silent Hill 2* remake comes this fresh third-person survival-horror in which time travel is key to surviving a nightmarish dystopia.

4 months+



JUDAS

RELEASE Unknown | DEVELOPER Ghost Story Games

The new narrative FPS from Ken Levine places you on a disintegrating starship. As the titular Judas, can you escape? And what deals will you make or break to do it?



007: FIRST LIGHT

RELEASE 2026 | DEVELOPER IO Interactive

Step into the shoes of James Bond before he attained his 00 status. From the makers of *Hitman*, this third-person action-adventure game promises espionage and quips.



ONIMUSHA: WAY OF THE SWORD

RELEASE 2026 | DEVELOPER Capcom

Wield a variety of deadly weapons as famous sword master Miyamoto Musashi. Incredibly visceral and kinetic combat is promised as Musashi fights through Edo-era Kyoto.

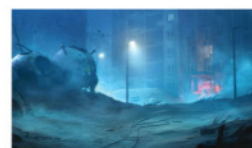
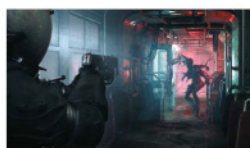
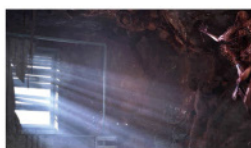
MOD

FLAME ON

Like playing as a demonic Tav from Avernus in *Baldur's Gate III*? Well, now you can grab a hot as hell hairdo to match the flames in your heart thanks to Lyniara's *Flaming Hair – Fire Hairstyles* mod. Grab it here: tinyurl.com/5n7mpdaa





Cronos: The New Dawn

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Autumn 2025

DEVELOPER
Bloober Team

PUBLISHER
Bloober Team

LINK
blooberteam.com

CRONOS: THE NEW DAWN

Kraków-set horror dripping with Soviet paranoia

Jacek Zięba reaches for his temple as he recalls the moment he realised Bloober's sci-fi horror game, set in alt-history Poland after a deadly outbreak, was about Covid. "We didn't want to make a game about the pandemic," the game director says. "When we started the story, it just worked for us. And at some point in the production, it was like, damn... we made something about the pandemic."

It was subconscious, Zięba says. *Cronos: The New Dawn* is rooted in the troubled history of post-WWII Kraków and the toll that life in the Soviet Union took on its people during the Cold War, a consistent theme in Bloober Team's games prior to last year's celebrated *Silent Hill 2* remake. The sci-fi twist is that some sort of plague struck Kraków in the 1980s, wiping out much of the population and leaving the city to decay for decades until you arrive.

The plague also created a bunch of shambling guts-on-the-outside mutants jealous of your guts-on-the-inside vanity, and they all require a few explosive rounds to the head. It's a videogame, after all.

AN OLD-FASHIONED PLAGUE

Lead writer Grzegorz Like says that he finds he's "more honest" when he writes about the people and places he knows intimately. "We discovered that it really enforces the questions we want to ask, and the themes. We overthrew communism and the regime by uniting, but now we want to ask you, 'What if

uniting and being close was the thing that destroyed the world? What then?' We wanted the characters to have difficult decisions, and the setting enforces the drama and important questions.

"After four years of working on the game it was too early to say, 'Let's do a game about now.' That was not our intention at all. When we realised we were actually venting some things, we realised we needed to approach it elegantly and with great caution. But at the same time it's horror, so tough stuff will happen."

The "tough stuff" that happened to me in *Cronos* opening two hours hewed pretty closely to survival horror standards. Before I encountered my first zombie stand-in the game tried to jumpscare me with a mannequin positioned for maximum spook factor when I rounded a corner with my flashlight on. Then a sudden clattering – a monster?! Nah – just a cat knocking something over.

When I do run into a monster, its muscles pulsing and stretching to stab at me from an alarming distance, I fight back less like *Resident Evil 4*'s Leon Kennedy and more like his grandpa with arthritic knees wearing a half-ton space suit.

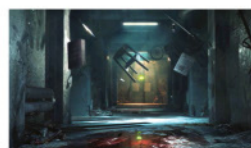
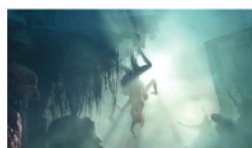
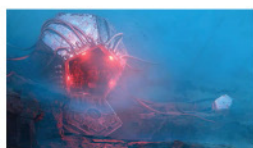
I'm slow. The lumbering pace definitely sells the spooky solemnity of stomping around the devastated city, any contact with mutant flesh or even the very air around me potentially too toxic to survive unprotected. But I'm immediately pining for Leon's roundhouse kick or even his 180-degree nope-out quickturn. When I die to a monster for the first time because I tried to jog past it and end up awkwardly sandwiched between it and the wall while it bludgeons me, *Cronos* feels awkwardly old-fashioned.

CRONONAUT

Zięba says that their vision for *Cronos* started with the protagonist in this chunky, retrofuturist suit that allows them to time travel, and they've committed to it. "We do everything we can to respect that and don't break the immersion. If you don't reposition, the monsters will tear you apart. Because you're in the suit, your mobility doesn't change a lot [throughout the game]. It's more about your skill, understanding the monsters and how to dodge them by running around, the telegraphs of all their movements."

PLAYED
IT

THE LUMBERING PACE SELLS THE SPOOKY SOLEMNITY OF STOMPING AROUND

Cronos: The New Dawn

➤ Early on, at least, *Cronos*' combat hews closer to dull than deliberate. There's no option for stealth or tactical planning, like setting up traps, before an encounter. When enemies show up I've got to turn around like I'm stomping through mud, get some distance, and then squeeze off a few charged-up headshots. Then there are the fights where I wait for the mutants to walk past a couple convenient explosive barrels I can pop to explode them into chunks of meat. And the dances around knee-high obstacles that invite me to play ring-around-the-rosy with the monsters at a pace that even Grandpa Kennedy could beat with one of those walkers with the tennis balls on the rear legs.

I do like *Cronos*' sci-fi pistol, which demands a nervy patience in the face of shambling monsters. In *Resident Evil 4*, a steady hand and some quickly fired headshots will take down basic enemies, but here a single bullet isn't worth much damage. Instead I have to hold the trigger down for a few seconds to charge up a more potent shot, my aim wavering slightly as I try to stay on target. Each charged shot feels weighty – and risky, with a small inventory and infrequent ammo drops keeping me perpetually a couple misses away from empty. It's just a shame the general motions feel so thoroughly gone through.

STEADY SHOT

If there's one combat gimmick in *Cronos* that seems like it has potential, it's the way the monsters can combine into higher-level creatures, including absorbing the bodies of the ones you've already killed. The first tool I got my hands on was a flamethrower that roasts nearby corpses, preventing them from helping the next freak who comes along from roiding out. As with ammo, fuel is in limited supply.

Before I started playing, Zięba insisted that letting the monsters merge was very, very bad. But that process of, er, 'absorption' takes time you can use to your advantage. "We're not saying, 'Don't let them start to merge,'" he says. If you let them start but you can interrupt them and that's part of your strategy, awesome. We're not leaning into there being only one way to play this game."

THE BOSS IS A DEAD RINGER FOR ONE OF RESIDENT EVIL 4'S IRON MAIDENS

I'm hopeful that over time access to more weapons, enemy types and combat arenas reveal nuances I didn't see in the first couple hours, when a single mutant evolving into its tougher form by snacking on a corpse more or less meant I should restart at the checkpoint just before the combat encounter. But so far it seems like *Cronos*' setting is much more compelling than the combat within it.

While Bloober has indeed set multiple games in Kraków, this is the first to focus on the working class ironworks district of Nowa Huta, which was envisioned as a socialist utopia.

"I feel like many times there are [game] stories that connect to some topics in the 'real world' like totalitarian systems, and we decided – don't invent, let's recreate," says Grzegorz. It will be more impactful. And now looking at this game at the end of production, it's sad to see that some things are dangerously relevant."

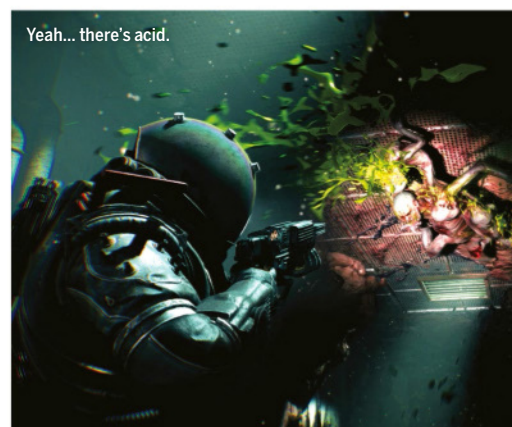
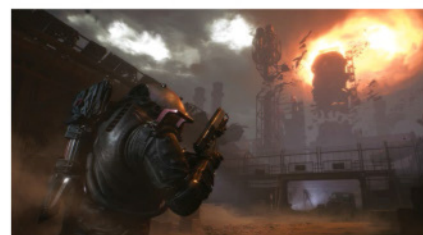
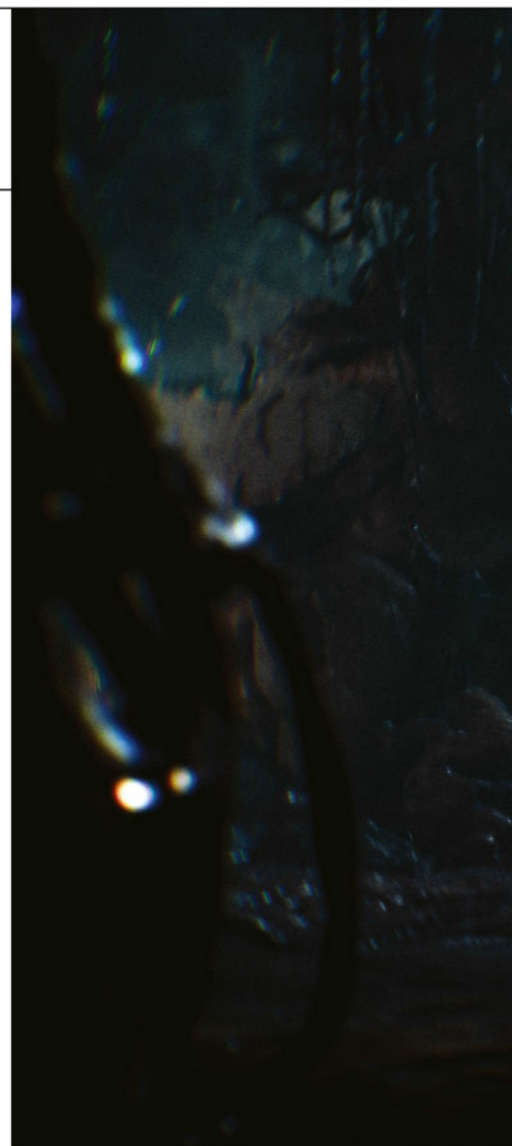
There are sparks of hope in the past, but *Cronos* as a whole is meant to evoke a sense of dread rather than the more optimistic style of time travel in *Back to the Future*. Zięba likens the game to an inverted pyramid: while it starts with a very wide sci-fi premise, with the vague sense that you can figure out what's gone wrong and do something to fix it, the further you go the more specific it gets. "It starts to be more about individual stories, about a couple people trapped in a strange situation," he says.

SURVIVING HORROR

Cronos' demo ends just before I get to time travel myself, though not before I clear a fairly rote boss fight in a tenement flat. The boss is a dead ringer for one of *Resident Evil 4*'s Iron Maidens, with weak spots I need to expose on certain parts of its body by lighting it on fire before blasting them with precision shots. Again, it's tense, but mostly comes down to running circles around the apartment to gain some distance and lead the boss past each conveniently placed explosive.

Thematically, I'm way more into what Bloober is doing with *Cronos*' bleak Soviet futurism than I was *Silent Hill 2*. But after the success of that game, they now have to survive the horrors of high expectations, I can't think of much scarier than that. Judging by its first two hours, *Cronos: The New Dawn* is a safe, unsurprising survival horror game from Bloober, following its work on *Observer* and *Silent Hill 2*.

Wes Fenlon



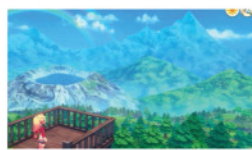
Yeah... there's acid.



ABOVE: Guy's been playing way too many point-and-click games.

LEFT: Kraków is known for its architecture, but this is, uh, something else.

Story of Seasons: Grand Bazaar



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 2025

DEVELOPER
Marvelous Inc

PUBLISHER
XSEED Games, Marvelous Inc

LINK
storyofseasons.com

STORY OF SEASONS: GRAND BAZAAR

A hard day's graft has never been so friendly

I've been tilling soil, mining ore and planning which days to spend crafting windmills around the town. The weather forecast isn't looking good, stating that low winds are expected. I'm rapidly running out of time before the next bazaar. If my high-quality items aren't ready, what am I possibly going to sell? I can't go another week shifting rocks and weeds onto unwilling customers. I'll let the whole town down if I'm not bringing in at least 50,000g.

Story of Seasons: Grand Bazaar knows how to make you work hard. You're given a small patch of land at the start and told to introduce yourself to the townsfolk. But before long, you're frantically farming each and every crop you possibly can for the season and praying for mutated, higher-quality ones. With a bit of luck, you'll be able to scramble together enough products to work both the morning and afternoon shift at the bazaar on the weekend, but there's never any guarantee.

Unlike a lot of the farming simulators I've played, you don't need to sell your products throughout the week to make money. In fact, it's far more beneficial to wait until the weekly market to bring in a lot more cash. Each Saturday I'd march down to the bazaar, pockets filled with goodies like herb cheese and yoghurt I'd spent precious time crafting throughout the week, and set up my stall. These days are split into two shifts, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, with an hour's break in between. I got so obsessed with

PLAYED
IT

making sure my stall was successful, that I had to take an actual break to remind myself that this wasn't my actual full time job and the success of my market had no life-altering consequences.

You also have to factor in how much money you need to rank up your bazaar for the town, alongside stocking items that are trending for the season. Not only this, but the time limit of each shift becomes massively restricting and on more than one occasion I felt a bit panicked that I wouldn't sell enough of my stock and it would either go off before the next weekend, or I'd have to embarrassingly take it back home afterwards. Not that there are any actual consequences for not doing as well. You just try again next week.

TALK OF THE TOWN

If there's one thing that *Story of Seasons: Grand Bazaar* does perfectly, it's encapsulating the feeling of living in a small town. No matter what happens, whether you work yourself too hard, have a flirt interaction with another character, or embarrass yourself at a dog show, everyone knows about it. Not only that, but everyone will talk about it to one another, and even to you, the next time you see them.

I made the mistake of working too hard one day and not paying enough attention to my rapidly depleting stamina bar, when suddenly my poor farmer collapsed outside of her house. The next day, everyone told me to stop overworking myself and asked how I was recovering, sharing sheepishly that they had heard about the incident. From who, I'll never know. I don't even know who came to my rescue and carefully carted me back inside. I just know that I quite literally owe them my life.

But as humbling as it was to have your fellow townsfolk talk about you behind your back, albeit not necessarily in a bad way for a change, it does help Zephyr town feel a lot more alive. You've still got repeated lines of dialogue if you speak to them every day, but at least it feels like everyone cares about you, which was more than enough to keep me captivated for longer than I like to admit before I remembered I have actual friends I should check in with, too.

Kara Phillips



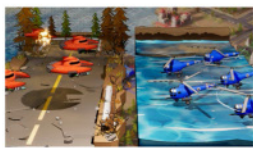
YOU DON'T NEED TO SELL YOUR PRODUCTS THROUGHOUT THE WEEK TO MAKE MONEY



ABOVE: You really have to earn your keep with this lot.

LEFT: The humble beginnings of every farmer. Turnips.

Earth Vs Mars



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

Coming soon

DEVELOPER

Relic Entertainment

PUBLISHER

Relic Entertainment

LINK

earthvsmars.game

EARTH VS MARS

Advance Wars spliced with Impossible Creatures

An acclaimed – albeit struggling – RTS studio developing a cute turn-based tactics game full of retro sci-fi Martians and animal soldiers sounds like one of those terrible April Fools' not-jokes that inundate my beleaguered inbox every April 1. But Relic's *Earth Vs Mars* is very real.

Relic takes big swings. *Homeworld* still feels like a groundbreaking RTS more than 25 years after it launched. *Dawn of War* and *Company of Heroes* pushed the troubled RTS genre forward at a time when most 3D strategy games were falling on their faces.

Even when it misses, I still find myself a captive general, eagerly diving into battle after battle. *Company of Heroes 3*'s dynamic campaign was a mess at launch, but it had so much promise and still held within it a seemingly infinite number of genuinely thrilling, complex RTS brawls full of novelties and smart ideas. This was not remotely obvious during my first taste of *Earth Vs Mars*.

CREATURE FEATURE

What we've got is *Advance Wars* with a bit of Relic's own *Impossible Creatures*. OK, here's the deal: Mars has invaded, and a generic Earth military force needs to put a stop to this nonsense with tanks, helicopters, soldiers and that sort of thing.

The Martians have some weird sci-fi gizmos, but so does Earth: specifically, the Splice-O-Tron, which lets you splice

humans with up to three different animals – from a final roster of ten – to create bespoke supersoldiers. I only had access to three: a fly, cheetah and rhino.

Impossible Creatures gave us 76 critters to splice, but *Earth Vs Mars* lets you get more into the nuts and bolts. See, instead of just splicing an ant and a crocodile, you can splice a rhino, a fly and a cheetah with a human, and then pick specific body parts to alter. Finally, a world where we can give people the noble noggin of the mighty rhino, the sleek gams of the fastest cat around, and also some massive wings from a gross fly. This is, I'll give you, incredibly cool.

Splicing a soldier with a cheetah and a fly gives you an fast aerial unit that can also spray acid over an area, damaging enemies who start their turn standing in the toxic goo. This isn't really a fly trait, but it's a great ability so I will generously let it slide. And then, I dunno, just give it the arms of a rhino for a laugh. Why not?

Some components, like the arms of a rhino, only alter the base stats of the units, but others confer special abilities or more notable buffs. A rhino tail will give you double counterattack damage, for instance, but you could also just give your rhino-man wings and watch them soar through the heavens.

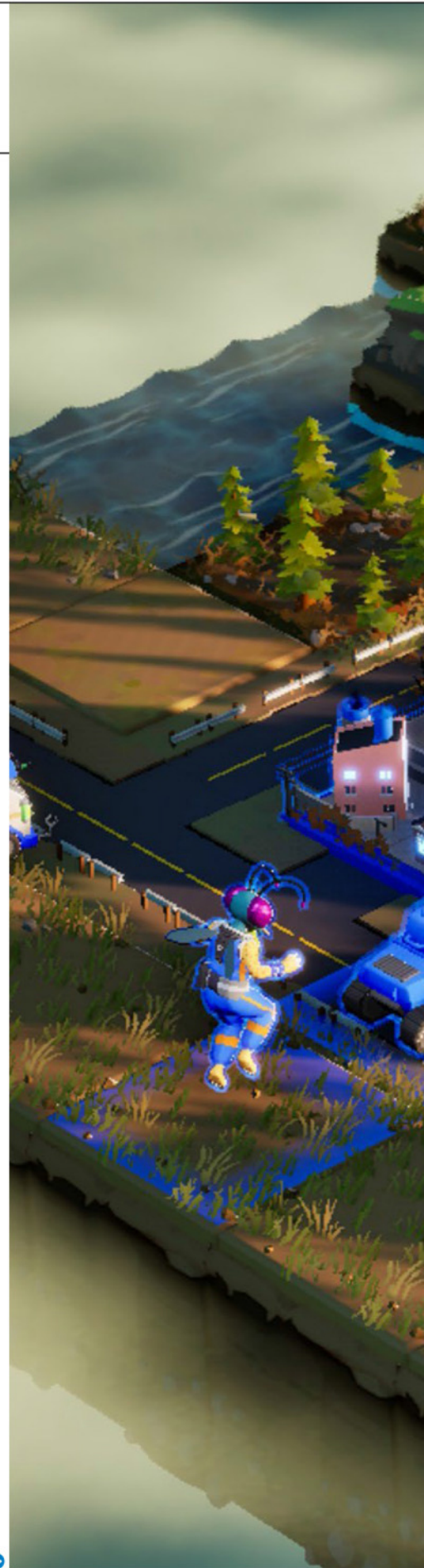
PLAYED IT

LAB TRIALS

You can also just go all-in on a single animal. If you want a dedicated healer who also has some survivability, going pure axolotl – unfortunately not available in the demo – seems like a good shout, as it can protect itself in a healing bubble with its head, and heal its pals with its tail.

Fiddling around with the Splice-O-Tron before my first bout, I started to get excited about all the ridiculous possibilities. I even contemplated donning my dressing gown and pretending it was a lab coat. But it was too hot in the flat and I remembered that my own hybrid critter (one part poodle, one part spaniel) had eaten it, so I discarded the thought.

Then I actually started playing and... it's fine? The UI feels like it's a placeholder – just because of how basic and unhelpful it is – and honestly the unit art and animation does too. Given this, it seems more likely this is being developed on a bit of a tight budget now that Relic and Sega



FINALLY, A WORLD WHERE WE CAN GIVE PEOPLE THE NOBLE NOGGIN OF THE MIGHTY RHINO



PREVIEW

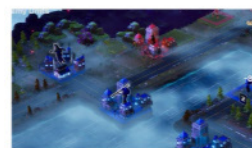
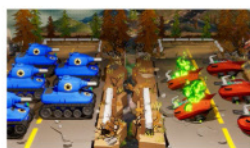
Earth Vs Mars



RIGHT: It's not looking so hot for the Martians.

BELOW: Maybe my artillery would do more damage if anyone was manning the cannons.





have split up. But even with that in mind, it just looks rough. Memorable art can be made with limited resources, it just hasn't been this time.

Like *Advance Wars*, it's a lightweight, accessible tactics romp in which you alternate turns with the enemy, capture tiny cities and bases, get into rock, paper, scissors fights, and deploy commander powers once your meter is charged up. Each commander, at least initially, has two powers to pick from at the start of a mission, from powering up your hybrids to calling reinforcements.

BRAIN POWER

I didn't actually get to use my favourite power, as it belonged to a Martian commander (they'll be playable in PvP). This cosmic interloper mutated a bunch of his basic troops, turning their heads into bombs. Pretty dastardly, honestly. Is the Martian military cool with this? Is he going to be facing a tribunal after the war is over? Who can say. These bomb-heads then just sauntered up to my Geneva Convention-adhering troops and went kaboom. Nasty stuff. Otherwise, it's all pretty perfunctory and familiar. And surprisingly staid.

When I was commanding my hybrids, outside of their special abilities, like bonking enemies back a few squares or spitting out acid, they functioned just like any other unit – but worse, because at least it's fun to watch an artillery barrage wipe out a bunch of floating sci-fi tanks, whereas it's a bit less exciting to watch someone in what looks like a bad rhino costume slap an alien.

And if you're thinking, "Hold on, a rhino-man slapping an alien sounds like something I'd like to see," I feel you, but you'd be wrong. Technically they just slap the air in front of them, and the aliens take some damage. It's not something you need to see more than once.

Not that I got to spend much time controlling my hybrids anyway, because in the available missions I was only able to bring a maximum of two; the rest of the time, I was just commanding generic units – each of them simple and one-note.

I was hoping for more weird nonsense. More character. At the very

least, I'd love to see some shit-talking between the opposing commanders. The premise is just so inherently silly, it makes it all the more jarring when the game is so conservative.

This extends to the missions themselves. I only got my hands on a few, and they failed to showcase any real novelties. Two of them tasked me with wiping out the enemy or capturing their HQ. One had no wrinkles whatsoever, while the second one shook things up a bit by including some fog of war. Not exactly a game-changer. The other was a territory capture race where victory is effectively handed to you.

INVASION PLAN

What I really missed during these missions was the sense that each was a bespoke puzzle, where every move has weight and risk – something *Advance Wars* nails. There was no need to come up with a strategy of any kind. You just push forward, recruit more units and overwhelm the enemy.

The closest it comes to requiring a plan is in the aforementioned fog of war mission. The fog has so little impact it might not be there at all, since the enemy commander is so predictable you really don't need to see what they're doing. This commander's ability, Invasion, summons flying units. And once it has enough cities under its control, it can start to recruit even more flying units – which cost quite a bit. So I stopped churning out infantry and tanks, switched to anti-air and helicopters, and it just couldn't adapt.

This mission was a puzzle in the same way a game of rock, paper, scissors where you know your opponent will always pick rock is a puzzle. Not remotely, then.

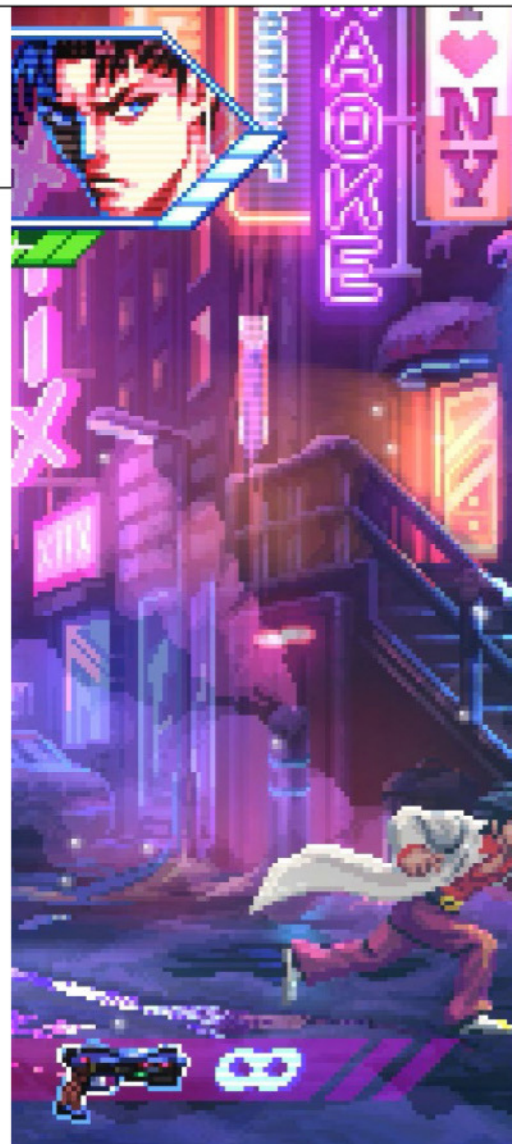
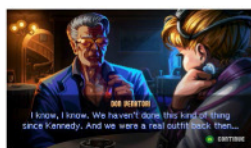
I don't want to write off a game based just on three presumably early missions – but this is how Relic is introducing the world to *Earth Vs Mars*. It's also releasing the demo publicly on July 25. This is likely what's going to determine how many people slap it onto their wishlists – apparently the only important metric these days. And it's left me not especially eager to play more.

There's still something here. I love the *Splice-O-Tron*, and the design of the maps is solid if uninspired, but from Relic I've come to expect more. This is one of the most important studios in strategy gaming, responsible for multiple legendary RTS games, and *Earth Vs Mars* just feels so removed from that legacy.

Fraser Brown



Neon Inferno



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
October 2, 2025

DEVELOPER
Zenovia Interactive

PUBLISHER
Retroware

LINK
s.team/a/2957720

NEON INFERNO

A stylish run-and-gun that splices *Contra* and *Metal Slug*

There's a hell of a lot to like about side-scrolling and gallery shooter *Neon Inferno*. It's violent, stylish, and dripping with character. It's also got a demo available right now ahead of its full release in October so, you know, if you like the sound of it from this write-up, then go download it. It's only like 440MB, so you'll have it on your rig faster than you can blink.

You play as one of two assassins, Angelo Morano or Mariana Vitti, who are employed by a notorious crime syndicate in a future dystopian New York City to take out its enemies. Angelo looks like he's walked straight out of a '90s sci-fi anime like *Ghost in the Shell*, while Mariana looks like she's walked out of a '90s sci-fi anime like, um, *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*. It's fine, they both look cool as fuck.

The assassinating, which is bountiful, takes place both on foot, where Angelo and Mariana can run, dive, swing and more while gunning down future goons, as well as on vehicle, with the pair borrowing Kaneda's sleek red bike from *Akira*. It's fine, both Angelo and Mariana look super cool as fuck on it, dodging traffic while exploding rivals, who stream at them on bikes of their own, as well as in helicopters. These vehicles explode. It's all very *Contra*.

Rival syndicate enforcers attack from both sides on multiple levels, as well as on multiple planes, with a background layer opening up *Neon Inferno's* gallery

shooting element. This works by pressing a different button to the regular fire button and then using a cursor-style target to cover foes in their own blood. The result is a gameplay loop where you're shooting both left and right in the foreground plane, as well as into the screen on the background plane. It's a bit much at first, but you quickly pick up the flow.

Away from running and gunning, Angelo and Mariana have at least one other trick up their future sleeves, too. Both assassins can, with a last-minute timed button press, redirect certain enemy attacks back at their origin or, if so desired, at anything else, too. As the energy attack comes in, Angelo and Mariana hold it in stasis before being given a brief moment to point the energy where they want it to go, before releasing it as an extra attack of their own. The timing is generous. This is not *Blasphemous*. But it does add an extra layer of complexity to the control scheme that you need to get comfortable with.

BOSSUS MAXIMUS

Each mission through the neon-drenched dystopian cityscape of NYC in 2055 then culminates in a confrontation with the target marked for assassination, which, in something that feels contractually mandated for a run-and-gun shooter, is multi-stage, epic in size and frantic. In the demo, for example, Angelo and Mariana must successfully disable a huge armoured vehicle and its weaponry before bringing the pain to their suddenly jetpack-wearing target. This is where the game feels most like *Metal Slug*, with our assassins dodging fire from all directions while facing off against armoured death.

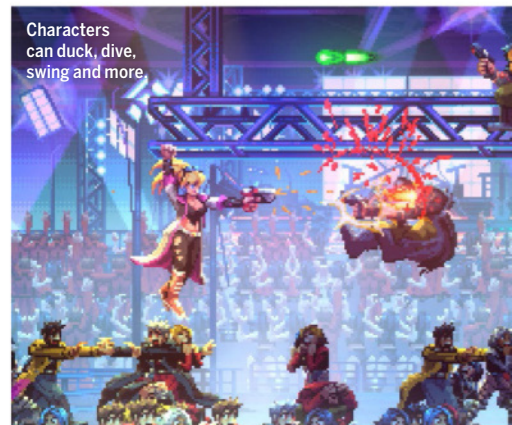
Other things to note? There's going to be a two-player co-op mode when the full game launches, which just makes sense, as well as a 1-credit-clear mode for more of an elite arcade experience, and the game's missions will take players all over future NYC, from the Bronx to Inner Manhattan. Overall, then, there's plenty to look forward to here, provided the price is right. Priced keenly and this could easily become a Steam Deck classic or a game that, aptly, could probably be made to run on retro '90s PC gaming hardware.

Robert Jones

PLAYED IT



Characters can duck, dive, swing and more.



THERE'S GOING TO BE A TWO-PLAYER CO-OP MODE WHEN THE FULL GAME LAUNCHES



ABOVE: The neon dystopia of NYC in 2055 drips with cyberpunk vibes.

LEFT: Super-sized run and gun bosses? Hell yes!

PREVIEW

Cop Bastard



ABOVE: If the rage meter is full enough, it'll also trigger one of *Cop Bastard's* swears one-liners.

RIGHT: Sparks and smoke give every gunshot that action movie feel.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBCDEVELOPER
TargimPUBLISHER
TargimLINK
store.steampowered.com

COP BASTARD

A retro shooter that's exactly as aggressively weird as you'd expect

Sometimes in this job, my decisions are easy. I see a game called *Cop Bastard* has released a demo, of course I download and play that demo. Simple. The question is, is there anything to it beyond a very good name? The answer: sort of?

Set in '90s Japan, but seemingly taking most of its cues from Hong Kong action movies, *Cop Bastard* casts you as... well, a cop who's kind of a bastard, having decided to just murder his way through an entire building full of criminals.

That makes for some retro shooter action – not quite boomer shooter, but in an older realm of fast-paced, uncomplicated blasting. You enter a room, you shoot whoever's in it, you hoover up ammo, and then you sprint into the next room.

Gunplay feels satisfying enough, with four punchy shooters – handgun, shotgun, Uzi, and Dirty Harry-style revolver – but there's not a lot of depth, and it's hard to see where some might be introduced as the game goes on. There's no tactical puzzle to the fights, no set of abilities to master, just pure duck hunting with yakuza targets. *Cop Bastard's* strength is less in its action, and more in its uniquely strange atmosphere.

SOFT BOILED

Visually it finds a really great look somewhere between fuzzy analogue video and low-poly FPS, and weirdly the two combine to create moments of

striking realism. That is, until you notice the *Max Payne*-esque frozen grimaces on the bad guys' faces. Muzzle flashes are huge and over-exposed and dust kicks up as you fire – you really feel like you're lighting up a room when you hold down the trigger. All together, it's a look not quite like anything else I've played.

Beyond that, the game is just bursting with idiosyncrasies, and it's not always easy to tell what's deliberately off-kilter and what's just rough around the edges.

Enemy barks are either deliberately or accidentally performed with exactly the cadence of a cheesy old movie dub. The only one of the guns that zooms in when you right click is, inexplicably, the revolver. The main objective of the demo level is just 'find way out from building'.

When you finish it, a chart shows exactly how many bullets hit you and where, allowing me to discover my cop had been shot 25 times in the head and 64 times in the forearm during his rampage. He's fine, he has bandages.

My favourite is the rage meter which builds as you fight. Hitting the key to activate it, you might expect to go into bullet time, or perhaps enjoy a brief period of invincibility. Nope. Instead, you recover a tiny amount of health, and then your character just spits at whoever's in front of him, to no effect.

It's certainly a vibe, though I will say, it's not a very culturally sensitive one. I've no idea of the nationality or background of solo developer Targim, but *Cop Bastard* certainly doesn't read as Japanese.

Between the very American guns, dodgy accents and ongoing confusion about whether it's actually a pastiche of Japanese or Hong Kong cinema (further tangled by two bad guys having a lengthy conversation about *Hard Boiled*), it doesn't exactly feel well researched. Let's say I wouldn't put money on the Japanese text that flashes up being accurate.

That aside, there's definitely something alluring about *Cop Bastard's* brand of deep-fried retro weirdness. I do fear that in a full-length game, its shtick will quickly wear out its welcome, but I can't say I'm not still very curious to see it. Certainly it sustains itself well enough for a 20-minute demo, and you can try it for yourself for free on Steam right now.

Robin Valentine

THERE'S NO TACTICAL PUZZLE TO THE FIGHTS, NO SET OF ABILITIES TO MASTER



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

February 10, 2026

DEVELOPER

Edmund McMillen/Tyler Glaiel

PUBLISHER

Edmund McMillen/Tyler Glaiel

LINK

store.steampowered.com

MEWGENICS

Breed your very own cat army

Isn't it kind of messed up that we selectively breed cats and dogs into asthmatic oddballs and then sell them to each other because we think they're cute? I love cats, but yeah, and that's basically what inspired *Mewgenics*, a game about breeding cats and sending them on adventures with turn-based combat (they're outdoor cats).

To pull one of PC Gamer's favourite terms out of the bag, *Mewgenics* is systems-driven to its core, with so many abilities, traits, items, enemy behaviours, hazards and other effects at play in each cat battle that I was rarely certain about what exactly would happen when I clicked something. That ability will blow that enemy over there and then he'll get harpooned on the next round, and if he's bleeding that shark will attack him, but watch out because you'll also blow that fire onto one of your cats...

Developers Edmund McMillen (*Super Meat Boy*, *The Binding of Isaac*) and frequent collaborator Tyler Glaiel often have to deal with the unanticipated consequences of their ambition. For example, they made a certain enemy spawn frogs to represent pestilence, and flies to represent famine, but forgot that the frogs would use their first turn to eat all the flies, because frogs eat flies. Well, what can you do? Frogs eat flies.

The pair generally doesn't get rid of funny or OP interactions like that, unless they soft lock the game or really screw up a fight. Cat abilities and spells come in

multiple class flavours – fighter, tank, etc – and though the designers are confident they understand how all the abilities within a class work together, players are going to mix-and-match.

HOME SWEET HOME

There's no less complexity at home, where you'll breed and care for your feline adventuring parties, decorating and renovating a house for them. Cats can only be sent on one excursion before they retire, but you'll want to keep the strongest of them around to fight off bosses that show up as the story progresses, and to produce future generations of cat heroes. Kittens can receive attacks, spells and attributes from their parents, as well as disorders, including ones like autism.

Mewgenics' themes might've gotten a little mixed up over time: McMillen has realised that it's also about family and the things we pass to our kids, which sits awkwardly with cat breeding. But disorders aren't debuffs. A cat with autism isn't great at everything, but is very good at casting spells they're born with.

McMillen has dyslexia, and in *Mewgenics* the disorder swaps sixes/nines and fives/threes in damage numbers and ability costs. He says fans have been excitedly pitching ideas for how to represent their own disorders.

Mewgenics steeps you in that '90s kind of edginess that revels in the world's flaws: grime, disease, decay, senseless violence and general stupidity. It's the stuff I grew up with as a teenage fan of Newgrounds games and Jhonen Vasquez comics like Johnny The Homicidal Maniac, but McMillen hears younger onlookers wondering why his art is so 'ugly' and questioning whether it's OK for the game's title to reference eugenics. "It's not like the game is saying it's a good thing," he says to that.

As for the art, they're still using Flash for its distinctive style of vector animation, though the software's called Adobe Animate now, since the Flash browser plugin is long gone. The world's changed since McMillen was making inflammatory Flash games like *Clubby the Seal*, but *Mewgenics* fits right into that oeuvre, and I think he might be right when he says it's his best game yet.

Tyler Wilde



PLAYED IT



CAT ABILITIES AND SPELLS COME IN MULTIPLE FLAVOURS



ABOVE: Just about everything on a battle map does something.

LEFT: The adventure spans multiple regions and bosses.

PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden

Bullet strikes have some good particle effects, with clouds of debris thrown up.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Crowbar Collective

PUBLISHER
Team17

LINK
s.team/a/1843840

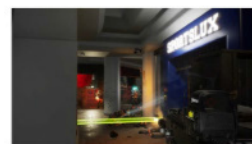
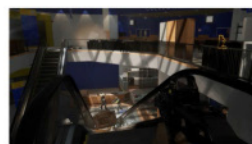
ROGUE POINT

Tactical shooting
over the rainbow

Presumably the name *Tom Clancy's Syndicate* was already taken, as *Rogue Point* takes the *Rainbow Six* template and fills it with mercenary goons working for rival corporations. They're not cybernetically enhanced – at least not in the demo build – as *Rogue Point* takes a more realistic approach to its corpo-combat.

PLAYED
IT

This means you'll die easily, and as with other team-based tactical shooters you'll need a mix of planning, communication and teamwork to make it through the mission alive. Blasting the first merc you see with a shotgun may be effective in the short term, but this just means his boss inside is alerted, and will shoot you with unerring accuracy through the window while more bad guys (who come in various forms, including snipers and a berserker who run straight at you with a machete) flank round the side of the building and you're on the floor a few seconds later, a



failure message being broadcast from your computer speakers.

And that's going to be a frequent occurrence unless you're playing as a tight team that can cover all the angles. *Rogue Point* takes you through planning and kitting-out stages before dropping you into the level, where you can spend cash earned from dropping mercs in earlier missions (and, importantly for the early game, in training) to upgrade your weapons and equipment – including dead drops that offer a chance at getting a weapon you can't get any other way. When even a first-aid kit costs \$100, every penny counts, and as it's not a game designed to be played solo (and there are no bots to add to a team with free slots) you'll spend a good chunk of

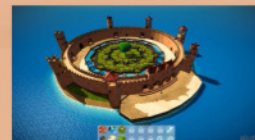
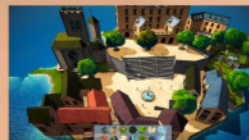
time here making sure everyone has the optimal loadout.

MALL OR NOTHING

There are currently four environments to hunt mercs in, with an airport, shopping mall and office joined by an oil rig. So far, so *Rainbow Six: Vegas*, *Ready or Not* and bits of *CoD*, and what look like very straightforward tactical missions in pursuit of bad guys with ever-higher star ratings and prices on their heads. There's a 'parametric' design system at work here that evolves the environments as you play, switching the position of intel drops and even their layout each time you play, so that they don't get old so quickly despite their limited number.

Whether a small amount of randomness in the levels is enough to prevent them from getting stale remains to be seen, but there's plenty of scope for upgrading your operator following a successful merc hunt thanks to skill upgrades. These enable team-building and longer-term play, so if a flow of new levels is forthcoming after launch, this could lay siege to Ubisoft's tactical base.

**WHEN EVEN A
FIRST-AID KIT
COSTS \$100, EVERY
PENNY COUNTS**



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Willis Studios

PUBLISHER
Willis Studios

LINK
s.team/a/3445040

BELLE CITIQUE

Taking the stress out of city building

Utterly charming, this relaxed city design game lets you build and rebuild without needing to worry about resources. There's a big dollop of *Townscaper* in both the way it looks and plays, and if it can maintain these levels of chill and enchantment could be a great new addition to the genre.

The island is a paradise. Bisected by a canal, it's a maze of plazas, parks, trees and housing, topped by a stone castle keep on the highest part. Villagers keep joining the burgeoning settlement, as do dogs, cats, ravens, sparrows and watchmen, and they often comment on how much they love the trees. It's not quite clear where they're coming from, as no boats arrive, but I'm glad they're here anyway.

They also keep telling me they want more keeps, even though there's nothing to defend against and it would spoil the charm of the place to add another fortification when there could be picturesque waterside housing in between the parkland and the coast, or a glorious fountain just outside their front doors.

A ROOM WITH A VIEW

Still, you've got to give the people what they want, so up it goes, this time with a different style of roof in a new colour in defiance of whatever planning regulations exist in this idyllic place. Eventually, you can unlock many more things to build, and it's satisfying to see your buildings link up across the landscape's organic grid – which can be toggled on and off – and a bit frustrating when they just won't do it.

PLAYED
IT

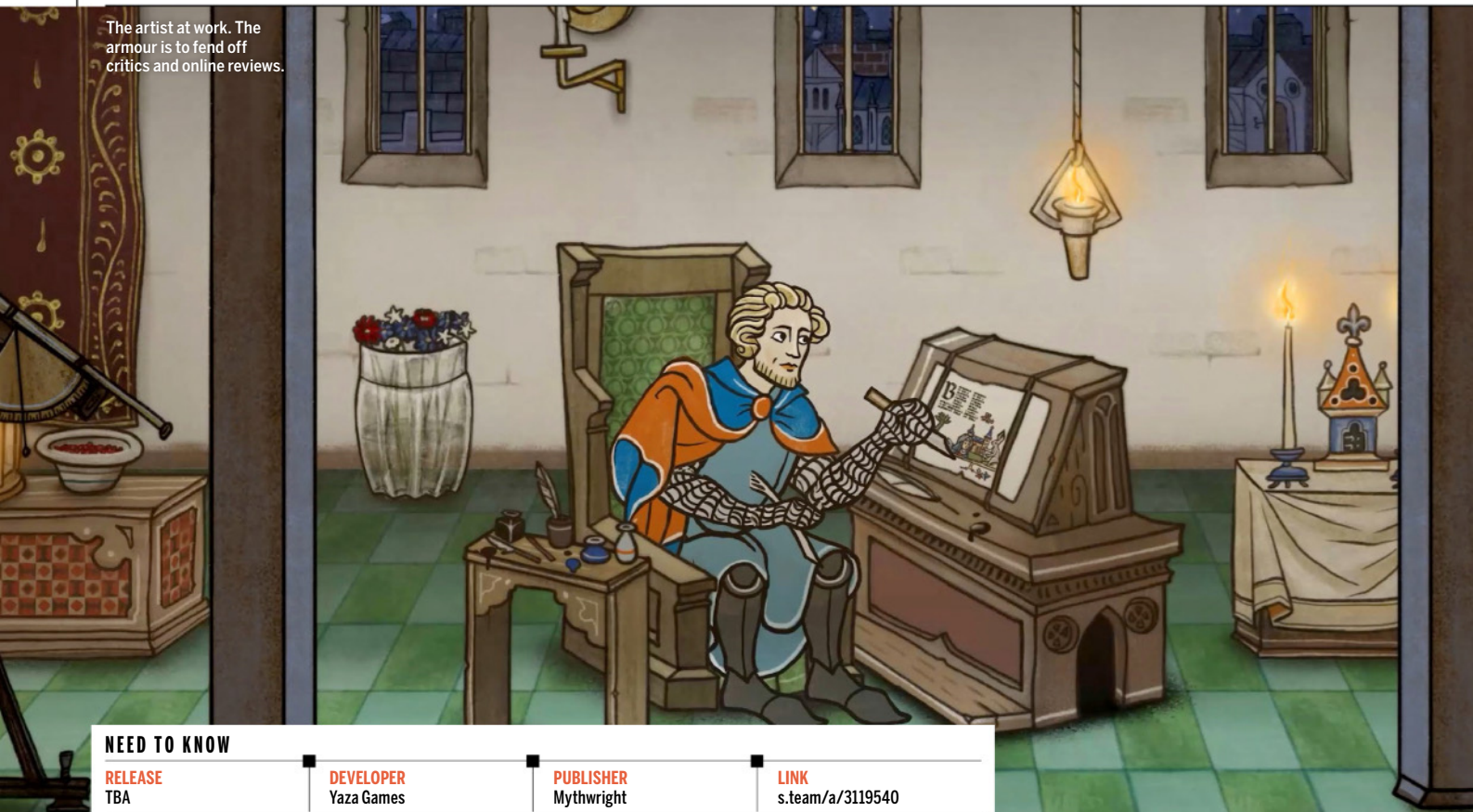
The game is a far cry from its developer's previous effort, 2023's dark fantasy deck-building ARPG *Halls of Watershot*, presenting a sunny world with little to worry you besides the snap of the grid and the requests of your population.

"Woof, woof, woof," says Bailey the dog, clearly in need of more parks to roam and chase squirrels in. And I agree wholeheartedly with him, but people keep demanding new keeps, buddy, so we have to build them.

PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden

The artist at work. The armour is to fend off critics and online reviews.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Yaza Games

PUBLISHER
Mythwright

LINK
s.team/a/3119540

SCRIPTORIUM: MASTER OF MANUSCRIPTS

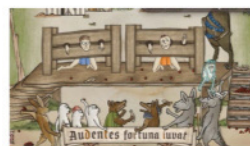
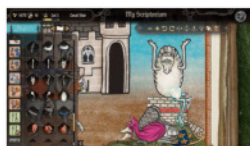
Illuminate your life with assorted dark-age bums

There's very little that is funnier than a medieval illustrator trying to draw a horse they've never seen from an unaccustomed angle, and the developers of *Scriptorium* understand this. And they should, having released turn-based donkey-farting simulator and all-round good time *Inkulinati* way back at the beginning of 2024.

PLAYED
IT

This time around, you're creating the illustrations. "It would be an honour," exclaims our illustrator, a demure young lady, in response to a retired knight's request to draw a beast. "Although I've never seen one..."

So we start with a Great African Beast, with legs like oaks, a nose like a branch, and some big teeth. Getting to work, I use the body and head of a donkey as a base, with a literal branch hanging off the front (I know illustrators who use similes, and they're all cowards) plus dragon legs. It has some sort of



ears, a tail, and is stomping over some buildings about a third of its size. For good measure, I print the word 'Beast' in the background. The knight is pleased, calling it "realistic" and claiming it "pierces the heart". I am less convinced of its verisimilitude, but then I have several centuries of cynicism and wildlife documentaries clouding my view.

DARKER AGES

A neat feature is that you can save your creations as PNG files to your desktop, ready for hilarious social media sharing. Only at this point do I notice that the beast doesn't have any eyes, and that there's a cheeky naked man at the bottom of the frame. Clearly, the illustrator isn't that demure.

A NEAT FEATURE IS YOU CAN SAVE YOUR CREATIONS AS FILES TO YOUR DESKTOP

And speaking of which, an elderly hermit wants her to draw his life story, full of satanic temptations. He wants to begin with a rainstorm, an ark and some animals, some of which are showing their bums but are otherwise free of devilment. He promises a five-star review.

Next is a romance: a blacksmith's daughter, a cemetery rendezvous, and a bout of nervous diarrhoea so bad it causes the dead to rise. You can use the gold you earn from commissions to buy new licentious illustrations (much like being a freelance magazine writer) and use them in your pictures, so I pick a lovely young lady and something unidentified but brown from the food section to go with this tale of woe.

Scriptorium is a lot of fun, as you assemble ridiculous pictures from a limited palette of parts to match what your clients want. You earn gold, expand your workshop, and try to get your work in front of the queen herself for a bit of royal patronage. The demo on Steam contains 17 commissions as well as a sandbox mode, but we don't currently have a release date for the full game.



FEROCIOUS

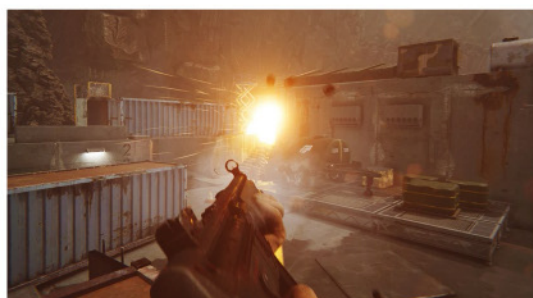
You didn't ask for reality, you asked for more teeth

The cretaceous creatures aren't always hostile. They're wild animals, but thanks to a device provided by a disaffected employee of the company that's behind both the reincarnated monsters and the mercs, you can attempt to communicate with them, control them to attack your enemies, or send them through small gaps to open new paths and sneak around the bad guys. There's even a baby T-rex.

This is tempered with the usual busywork of the survival game – foraging for materials, crafting everything from bandages to weapons, searching for food and trying to stay out of the way until you're kitted out well enough to be dangerous. It's a good-looking FPS with some sharp dino models, and there's a demo on Steam.

FIRST
LOOK

With Jurassic Park back in the cinemas and not doing too badly, what better time to start running and screaming from dinosaurs? And so it goes, as you're shipwrecked on a mysterious island and asked to survive in the face of human mercenaries with guns as well as actual living dinos.



RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
OMYOG

PUBLISHER
tinyBuild

LINK
[s.team/a/1645630](https://steamcommunity.com/linkshared/?smtid=STCOMM&smtcid=1645630)



DISCOUNTY

Sell cheap food to heal a community

RELEASE
August 21

DEVELOPER
Crinkle Cut Games

PUBLISHER
PQube

LINK
[s.team/a/2274620](https://steamcommunity.com/linkshared/?smtid=STCOMM&smtcid=2274620)

Stardew Valley except you're Pierre and people like you. Your store is a discount supermarket in a pixel-art village, selling

cheap unlike the high prices charged in Pelican Town (though you do have a monopoly), and it's up to you to lay it out, decide what stock you'll carry, and

how you'll expand the business in the face of local opposition to a newcomer. Of course you'll be able to win them around with good service.

PLAYED
IT



0845

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8485

9837496

423

1. STORH CITY

2. OCIO

3. LITTLE NYTO

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KEPT YOU
WAITING,
HUH?

Can **METAL GEAR SOLID DELTA: SNAKE EATER**
make the fanbase whole again?

By Joshua Wolens

Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater

It's all a little bit *Metal Gear*: the same basic story with some of the characters swapped out. Twenty-one years ago, *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* released to a divided fanbase, still roiling in its reaction to the then-controversial, now-classic *Metal Gear Solid 2*.

They didn't like the switcheroo. They wanted to be Solid Snake; they got Raiden. They wanted a high-tech spy thriller; they got a bizarre meditation on information in the age of the internet. They wanted Mei Ling and her big book of apropos quotes; they got Rose and her constant needling about emotional distance and the significance of tomorrow's date – which was April 30, in case you forgot. They got something they didn't sign up for, and it left them feeling frustrated, hoodwinked.

MGS 3 pulled it all back together, and it even did it without giving fans what they thought they wanted. You still weren't Solid Snake, the spy thriller was decidedly low-tech, and rather than a continuation of the tale set up in *MGS 1* it pitched us all the

way back to 1964 and the, um, sweltering jungles of Russia. But it worked. Players loved it, and even those who adored *MGS 2* found something to treasure in the third game's personal tale of a spy on a quest to kill the person he loves most in the world.

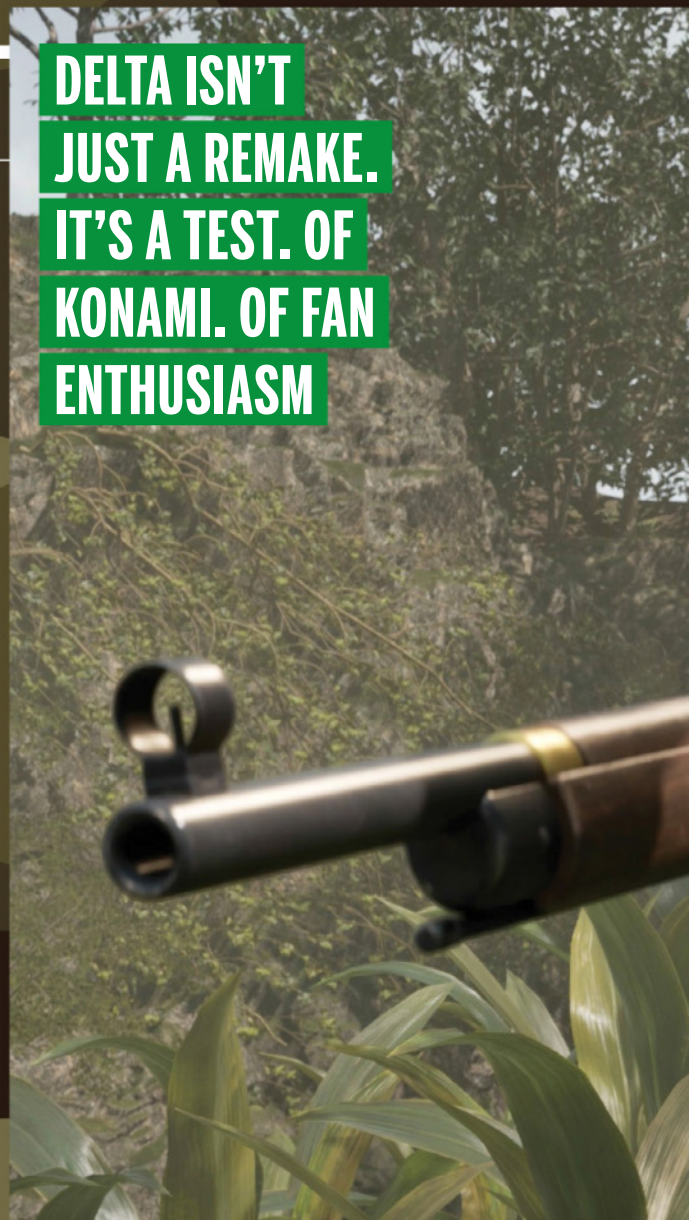
Two decades on and here we are again, with a fanbase fractured by the fracas surrounding *Metal Gear Solid 5*. They lament its missing chapters, its strange twists, its retcons, the absence of series mainstay David Hayter as the English voice of Snake, but most of all they lament the events surrounding it: the acrimonious departure of Hideo Kojima – a name still synonymous with the *Metal Gear* series he created ten years after he left – from Konami. Can *Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater* pull off the same trick again, and reunite a scattered fanbase?

THE BOSS' WILL

"*Metal Gear 3*, really, is my favourite game in the series," says Hayter, firmly back in the hot seat as Snake after *MGS 5*'s strange interlude swapped him out for Kiefer Sutherland. "It just really dialled down into what Snake is about, what *Metal Gear* is about, and now it's been, what – ten years since the last *Metal Gear* game? Yeah, I really hope people will rally around."

But for all its similarities to *MGS 3*'s release, *Delta* has even tougher challenges to overcome. Whatever they felt about *MGS 2*, no fan in the early '00s doubted Kojima's ability to make a *Metal*

DELTA ISN'T
JUST A REMAKE.
IT'S A TEST. OF
KONAMI. OF FAN
ENTHUSIASM



BELOW: Gigantic nuclear-armed tanks can be shot at with a rifle, if you like.

Gear game. Today, players wonder if Konami's up to stewarding the series without his hand on the tiller, especially with its reputation still marked by the lingering damage of his explosive departure.

So *Delta* isn't just a remake. It's a test. Of Konami. Of fan enthusiasm. Of the entire concept of *MGS* – not just a game, but a series – without Kojima at the helm (discounting the unloved, early, and now quietly forgotten attempt that was *Metal Gear Survive*). It's the studio shaking out the cobwebs and flexing its fingers, trying to see if it can get a feel for operating in this world without the man whose presence lingers at the studio even a decade after he left, haunting it like some kind of, ah, phantasmal ache.

Perhaps that explains Konami's almost religious sensibility towards the remake, where the desire not to tinker, not to tweak, not to leave a hair out of place from the original game seeps from every hyper-detailed, 4K pore. "When we began production of *Metal Gear Solid Delta*:





Snow Eater, we spent an enormous amount of time discussing what direction to take with the remake,” says *Metal Gear* series producer Noriaki Okamura.

“We debated what parts to change and what parts to leave unchanged.” In the end? The answer was to not change much outside of the tech.

“Regarding game design and scenario, we decided to faithfully reproduce the original dev members’ intentions to the point of being overly faithful, as these elements are universal and timeless.”

Rather than a swingeing, *Resident Evil 2*-style overhaul, “Our guiding principle was to update the graphics

ABOVE: Either the best boss fight in history or the quickest. Your choice.

and controls to reflect the evolution of gaming over the past 20 years, ensuring that today’s players would find the game enjoyable to play.”

So far as Okamura is concerned, the original is too sacred to touch, to even consider touching. When I asked what he would change if – in some hypothetical universe – he were instead making a true, sweeping overhaul of the original, he said, “I think we’d probably come to the same conclusion. I don’t feel like there’s a need to change the game design or storyline for *MGS 3*.”

It’s hard to know how seriously to take that, as an outsider. No doubt Okamura and the wider Konami team have genuine respect for the original game, but is it really too holy to brook any improvement at all? It’s interesting to contrast Okamura’s clear reverence for *MGS 3* with the attitude of Hayter, its star. Unlike modern-day Konami, Hayter is under absolutely no burden to prove himself worthy of the *Metal Gear* legacy. Indeed, his acting across the series is a key part of that legacy already, and

SNAKES AND LADS

The VIPs of Delta



NAKED SNAKE

The man of the hour. Dispatched to Russia on a mission to save the Earth. Will absolutely never process the trauma.



THE BOSS

A true patriot. Or she was until she defected to the Soviet Union. That was a mark on her record, sure.



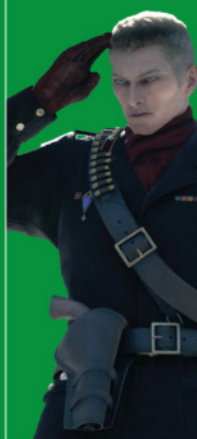
OCELOT

Weird gunfighting cat boy, also The Boss’s son. Probably won’t become a series staple who is also a cowboy later.



VOLGIN

Coup-plotting Russian and *MGS 3*’s main villain. Also has lightning powers, which probably helps with the first thing.





» speaking honestly? If he were given a chance to revise his old performance, he might take it.

“I hate to say this, but I feel like I’m a better actor now than I was then,” says Hayter. “I mean [my performance] is unusual, and I think that captures a certain moment in time that I’m glad they’re recreating, but if I was to do it again, I would probably have a slightly better grasp and control of what I wanted to do with it.”

It’s driven home in the remake by the new, modernised graphical style, with its hyper-realistic men who shoot bees and very angry astronauts: “There was always this strangeness that rode through it, and so Snake’s voice isn’t necessarily designed to be fully real. In a way, it’s got a bit of anime to it.” Does that play with a new, ‘photo-real’ face? “I think there’s a little incongruousness,” says Hayter, “and I probably would have grounded it a little more, but that’s the fun of the character, so I think it’ll work”.

So Konami’s dedication is doubtlessly real, but its sheer

ABOVE: Enormous gunfights are a key part of stealth.



BEE SERIOUS

Combat essentials for the apiarist on the go



1 WEAR A MASK

This way people won’t be able to identify you, even though you are clearly Gary, the only man accompanied by 400,000 bees.

2 ADD A DASH OF COLOUR

Yellow is in this season! Just because it’s the Cold War doesn’t mean you can’t be hot to trot.

3 BEES

No, really. Just carry those bees around with you everywhere you go. You’d be amazed how many problems you can solve with bees.

THE FOX ENGINE IS A RELIC OF THE KOJIMA ERA



fanaticism might be, perhaps, a little rhetorical: more about walking on eggshells around a disgruntled fandom than about *MGS 3* being a truly perfect game.

IT HAS TO BE THIS WAY

After all, it's not like there are no changes in the remake. *Delta* incorporates a crouchwalk that was previously a 3DS-only mechanic (the '00s were a hell of a time), folding new and previously cutscene-only animations into Snake's deck of CQC moves, even – in the game's New style mode, which features more tweaks and changes over its Legacy style mode – new pin-up posters. Well, new-old pin-up posters.

"The game stages feature posters of real-life individuals," says Yuji Korekado, creative producer. "We reached out to the individuals who appeared in the original game and asked if we could use their current photos, and to our delight, everyone kindly agreed. As a result, we were able to use photos that each individual selected, showcasing

their current selves." Flick over to New style and you get these kinds of delicate, art-restorer-style tweaks, "Major changes include the title screen, the opening movie by Kyle Cooper, and the singing by Cynthia Harrell, allowing you to enjoy both the old and new versions," promises Korekado.

Strangely, it's the aside about the posters more than the scorching UE5-ness that excites me for *Delta* – it's exactly the kind of absurd, minor detail that would have gotten undue attention in the development of the original. A resurrection of the spirit, not the flesh.

But old-fashioned loyalists needn't fear: the flesh is very much there, it's just ray-traced now, with a particular emphasis on "realistic lighting, including indirect light, and [conveying] the density and realism of natural objects," says Korekado.

It does raise a question, though: why not the Fox Engine, used in both *MGS 5* and *Metal Gear Survive*, which has already proved itself capable of shouldering a full-scale MGS game? To hear Korekado tell it, it's mostly down to magical leaf tech, "The Lumen and Nanite technologies newly adopted in UE5 were deemed suitable for achieving these goals, leading to the decision to adopt UE5."

But the symbolism is hard to ignore. The Fox Engine is a relic of the Kojima era, created in-house at Kojima Productions. It's difficult to imagine a world in which Konami willingly conjured those old ghosts even if UE5 didn't have whizzbang leaf tech; this is its big stab at

showing it can do *Metal Gear* without Kojima.

INDISPENSABLE MEN

It is, admittedly, a little unfair. For as much as we (and I, in this very article) use Hideo Kojima and the developers on the *Metal Gear* series almost interchangeably, the truth is that Konami is still home to a number of devs who toiled on the series and made their mark on it over the years – Okamura and Korekado included.

But that number can only ever decrease. "Years have passed since [the release of the last new *Metal Gear*]," says Okamura, "and the number of members who had worked on the MGS series alongside the original staff had dwindled within the company." It was this realisation, says Okamura, that led Konami to return to the series, "I felt that if we were going to reboot the MGS series, now was the time."

Well, perhaps the business reasons helped a little, as prosaic as they are. "I was thrilled when I heard [*Metal Gear*] was coming back," says Hayter. "Was I surprised? I don't know... Most games when they're 27, 28 years old, they fade away... but I live this every day. I go to Comic Cons and I talk to fans, and there's always been new people coming into it... and I mean, I work in Hollywood, so I know that it's profitable, you know? It's a profitable title. A wise company is going to bring that back."

But when Okamura and Korekado speak about it, *Delta* seems like just as much an opportunity for Konami to fill those widening gaps in its

BELOW: Snake Eater's femmes are appropriately fatale.



Like the OG, Snake's uniform will change depending on your camo. Unlike the OG, his body will also change depending on how many wounds you've accumulated.

Like the OG, Snake's uniform will change depending on your camo. Unlike the OG, his body will also change depending on how many wounds you've accumulated.

Snake's enemies include GRU soldiers, KGB agents, WWII heroes, a very old man with a rifle, crocodiles, the common cold and hunger. Good luck.

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SNAKE

➤ institutional knowledge as it is about anything else. “With many of the original staff members now pursuing new paths, we are aware that there are still elements lacking in our ability to fill the gaps left by their departure,” says Okamura, putting the team that remains in a tricky spot when it ever gets the notion to “create a new *MGS* game that builds upon their legacy.” If there’s a lesson to *Metal Gear Survive*, perhaps it’s

what happens when Konami tries to leap directly into a brand-new *Metal Gear* without taking the time to nail the fundamentals. Because those fundamentals are, well, pretty weird.

"I've been a working screenwriter for 26 straight years," says Hayter, "and written on countless pieces, and I think I'm pretty good at it. But I look at the *Metal Gear* scripts, and I'm

like, 'I could never do this'. That's a singular voice... the tone of it, the execution of it is something beautiful that isn't done the way I would do it."

It's why a remake makes sense. Trying to replicate that distinct voice in something new would be doomed from the start. On the other hand, trying to get players to accept a wholly new *Metal Gear* with an entirely new vibe and perspective would probably be like trying to

QUICK! CHANGE!

Perhaps the most exciting part of the remake for old fans is the new quick-select camo menu, saving you precious seconds of menu faff to swap gear.

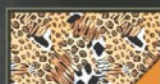
CAMOUFLAGE

UNIFORM

FACE



-25 ↓



-20 ↓



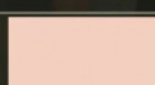
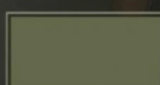
-05 ↓



-25 ↓



+10 ↑



+05 ↑



+35 ↑

A Change Camouflage

SPY TOOLS

Sneak gets an appropriately large and ridiculous arsenal of spy gadgets to help him on his quest through the USSR. Although, yes, this one is just a gun.



bath a cat. Plus, hey, its themes remain discomfotingly relevant. “Even now, as we continue to produce this work, we are constantly amazed by the foresight and universality of the original dev members,” says Okamura.

Hayter agrees, “There’s so many things not necessarily predicted in *Metal Gear*, but anticipated,” he says. “So the fact that we are in a similar spot with Russia, for example, as

we were back during the Cold War: it’s not necessarily a surprise... but that’s *Metal Gear* – you get a kickass adventure, but then you also get a lesson in nuclear fission, nuclear fusion, artificial intelligence, what have you.”

For now, caution in abundance: crossing the river by touching the stones. Perhaps that explains why *Delta* didn’t – as was rumoured – release in time for the original’s

20th anniversary in 2024, even though press got a hands-on with the *Virtuous Mission* in August of that year.

Did the experience of the *Master Collection*, which came out part-baked in 2023 and was only brought up to snuff by a series of patches the following year, give Konami pause? The company is keeping characteristically schtum. Though Okamura says, “The team members

DESPITE THEIR CAREFULNESS, OKAMURA AND CO ARE OF COURSE THINKING ABOUT WHAT'S NEXT



worked hard to create many additional features beyond the Virtuous Mission that players experienced at the time. We believe that we have now reached a point where we feel we have accomplished what we set out to do.”

Regardless, despite their carefulness, Okamura and co are of course thinking about what's next. “Through the development of *MGS Delta*, we have also gained a new sense of what our team is capable of,” he says. Is that a brand-new *MGS*? No. Or not yet, anyway. But it might be a future remake that takes bigger swings, that's willing to make deeper and weirder cuts to its source material. “By creating remakes with stronger originality in different directions or entirely new types of works, we may be able to expand our creative horizons.”

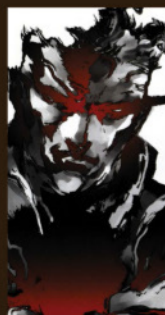
So probably no *MGS 6* any time soon, sounds like. But an *MGS 1* remake? Or 2? Maybe even *Metal Gear 1* and 2? Konami isn't saying, but it seems well within the realms of possibility, at least if fans don't

ABOVE: Firing rockets at helicopters: also stealth.



SHIFTING GEAR

Which *MGS* needs remaking next?



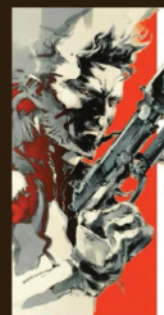
METAL GEAR SOLID

An obvious choice. The OG 3D *Metal Gear* feels a little creaky these days, and with GameCube remake *The Twin Snakes* presumably trapped in Nintendo jail, maybe it's time to just re-remake the damn thing.



METAL GEAR

The connoisseur's choice. *Metal Gear* is an astoundingly basic top-down stealthier from the '80s. There's a lot a remake could do to make it more fun, but also a whole bunch of necessary creative swings Konami might not want to take yet.



METAL GEAR SOLID 2

The game most similar to *MGS 3* might be a natural follow-on from a remake of that game. Plus, all its dark foreboding about the internet destroying our brains is more relevant than ever.



MGS: PEACE WALKER

Now we're talking. Take *MGS 5*, swap out the grimdark of 1984 for a 'Naked Snake goes to the Caribbean' Saturday morning cartoon, and you have *Peace Walker*. Doesn't that sound like the greatest game ever?



ABOVE: Pretty. Traumatized. Pretty traumatized.

outright reject *Delta*. Will the series ever be the same? That thing from 20 years ago you fell in love with on a PS2 or a very rickety PC port?

Outside of remakes, the simple answer is no. “I think it’s absolutely possible [to make a great brand-new *Metal Gear*],” says Hayter. “Will it be the same? No. There’s no way to replicate [Kojima’s] exact genius, his exact weirdness, his specific personality.”

I wonder if acclimatising fans to that fact when they spent years waiting for someone to pull off some sort of grand reveal of the missing parts of *MGS 5* isn’t part of Konami’s plan. “I think there’s a way to do a different generation of games,” says Hayter. “When I was a kid, I loved Tim Burton’s *Batman*, and was like, ‘That’s how *Batman* should be done.’ And then Chris Nolan does *Batman*, and you’re like, ‘Oh, that’s pretty badass as well.’ So will it be the same? No. Could it be amazing? Sure.”

Whether fans take to the remake or not, *Metal Gear*’s resurrection is a fascinating thing to watch. Konami

has to navigate multiple paradoxes: it’s *Metal Gear*’s steward and advocate, but can barely ever bring itself to say the name of the man whose name is on the original box. It wants to win over wayward fans, but the series is famous for hardly ever giving players what they thought they wanted from each entry. And, of course, Konami – and especially Okamura – wants to preserve *MGS* for future generations. Doesn’t a dazzling new remake run the risk of supplanting the original?

THIS IS GOOD, ISN'T IT?

For that last one, at least, there is an answer. Asked if he envisions *Delta* as a complement to the original *MGS 3* or a replacement for it, Okamura says, “Both. For this reason, we have prepared both the original, *Master Collection* version and the remake, *MGS Delta*. For new users who are just getting started with the *MGS* series, *MGS Delta* may be more familiar. For long-time *MGS* series fans, the *Master Collection* version may feel

superior.” When it comes to picking your *Metal Gear*, Okamura’s philosophy is simple, “We would like to leave that decision up to the players themselves.”

“I was literally playing the original *Metal Gear Solid* a couple days ago, and it’s still a banger,” says Hayter. “So will [*Delta*] replace [*MGS 3*]? I don’t know. I just think it’s a different, upgraded version.”

It’s the most exciting time to be a *Metal Gear* fan in years. With *Delta* imminent and a *Master Collection* Vol 2 somewhere out there on a Konami hard drive, we’re eating like we haven’t been able to in almost a decade. Will all this end up with a renaissance; a whole new series of games? That’s on you and me.

“We are wondering whether our new team should continue making *MGS* series [games],” says Okamura. “We believe that *MGS Delta* is a test of that. This is the best we can do at this point. If you continue to place your trust in us and allow us to move forward, we believe that will be the ‘success’ of *Delta*.” ■

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MYTH MAKERS



By Ian Evenden

Asymmetric fantasy 4X
ENDLESS LEGEND 2 parts the
murky waters to unveil a new
world, new factions, and a
new way of revealing the map

Endless Legend 2

Welcome to Saiadha. It's nice here. There's plenty of coastal real estate for refugees from Auriga to build a new life, rich in resources and blissfully separated by sea channels from other races who might be looking for a fight. There are none of the harsh winters of the first *Endless Legend*'s setting, but this new planet does have some meteorological quirks of its own.

Endless Legend 2, Amplitude Studios' new 4X which will be heading into Early Access this September, with a demo available on Steam by the time you read this, picks up after the first game, with the survivors of a hasty exit from its frozen planet – some familiar, some new – landing on an ocean world and having to deal with their new home's idiosyncrasies as well as one another.

Beside the setting, there's a lot that's new about *Endless Legend 2*.

It's been 11 years since the original game, and in that time Amplitude has released four full games and joined and left publisher Sega – *Endless Legend 2* will be published by Hooded Horse. It's lost one of its founders (Mathieu Girard, who would go on to release *Solasta: Crown of the Magister*) and continue to attract talent from across the world.

It's something the game's director Derek Paxton, aka 'Kael', knows a bit about. He's new to the *Endless* series, having moved to Paris just to work on the game, but having started making games with *Fall from Heaven*, a total conversion for *Sid Meier's Civilization*

IV, released back in 2005. Paxton was then a design consultant on expansion pack *Sid Meier's Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword*, and was also involved with *Sid*

Meier's Civilization IV: Colonization. He later worked with Stardock on *Elemental: War of Magic*, *Fallen Enchantress* and *Sins of a Solar Empire: Rebellion*, and was lead designer of *Elemental: Fallen Enchantress* in 2012.

So it's a bit of an understatement when Paxton starts our interview with "I've been making 4X strategy games for a while." The same could be said of Amplitude itself. Formed in 2011 by a couple of former Ubisoft employees, the French developer has put out five previous *Endless* titles as well as *Humankind*, 2021's 4X that took a less fantastical view of history. All of these games are filtering into *Endless Legend 2* in some way.

"I really love that Amplitude has kind of pulled the best pieces out of *Endless Space 2* and *Humankind* to make *Endless Legend 2* better," says Paxton. "*Endless Legend* was a great game of course, but in *Endless Space 2*, Amplitude added this system to have divergent quests, quest branching that can happen. So there's a quest that you're presented with, but you as a player have multiple ways that you may want to handle it. You get to pick your objective. That was carried forward into *Endless Legend 2* from the narrative and quest side. And on *Humankind*, the battle system is the big thing. Battles were decisive in *Endless Legend*, they were very streamlined, and players absolutely gave a lot of feedback that they wanted more depth and detail there."

BELOW: Seasons change, but *Endless Legend 2*'s world looks great in the autumn.





MEET THE FACTION

Last Lords have a beaten up appearance.



THE LAST LORDS

1

Once noble knights, the Last Lords are now cursed beings of pure Dust, their souls trapped inside hollow suits of armour. No longer needing food, their population does not grow naturally. Instead, new Last Lords must be awakened with resources or by drawing others to their cities. Few survived the exodus from Auriga, and players must gather Dust to revive more and determine their fate. Now Consul Tyabana and her council must find a way to restore the rest of their people and either find a way to cure their curse or embrace their vampiric nature.

The Last Lords affect Saiadha in unique ways. They can create estates in villages of minor factions, using them for taxation, labour, or as a source of life energy to resurrect others – particularly powerful beings known as Primordials.

The Last Lords offer a well-rounded army composition, with a solid infantry core, ranged support, and powerful cavalry. However, Lords armies can prove tough thanks to abilities that allow them to heal in battle by leeching life from their enemies. Their true strength emerges when the seas retreat and more opportunities arise to awaken their slumbering kin. Strategic Dust harvesting from local populations is key to turning these warriors into the unchallenged rulers of Saiadha.

MEET THE FACTION



The Necrophage have burrowed underground.

NECROPHAGE

2

The Necrophage are one of the most aggressive and relentless factions. Their entire economy is centred around a single city ruled by their Queen. Unlike other factions, they do not rely on diplomacy or alliances – only conquest. Their forces feed on the land and their enemies, turning the battlefield into a resource for expansion and survival.

Though restricted to a single city, the Necrophage can construct a vast network of tunnels, allowing their units to move swiftly across regions. These tunnels enable strategic flexibility and make it possible to strike from unexpected directions. Even without founding new cities, the Necrophage can control territory by seizing regions and funneling resources to their capital.

Their military focuses on overwhelming force. Most units are designed to deal increasing damage and to hunt wounded or isolated targets. Some have surprising durability, but the true strength of the Necrophage lies in their numbers and adaptability. Even heavy casualties are quickly replaced by larvae, which can evolve into powerful units directly on the front lines. Driven by instinct and hunger, the Necrophage see other factions as prey. Every battle fuels their economy, every corpse feeds the swarm – and peace is never an option.



» INTO THE DEEP

Depth and detail are two things Amplitude is known for, and as you watch *Endless Legend 2* in action you can spot the dense forests and open plains of the starting islands as they emerge from the fog while your units explore. The islands aren't large at the beginning of the game, and there's a very good reason for that.

This new world of Saiadha is an ocean planet, at least to begin with. In the same way the first *Endless Legend*'s Auriga had an issue with winter, a season that made life much harder for the game's races and which got worse as the turns went by, Saiadha has a monsoon.

And just as the Earth version of the monsoon is a bit more than a rainstorm, so it goes on Saiadha. Darkness blankets the land for long periods of time as howling winds and pouring rain drive the newly arrived factions back to their cities. At the same time, special items that restore movement to armies and fill up your reserves of Dust appear, while minor factions become unusually aggressive. It can be a time to head out and do some conquering, or perhaps raise your defences and fend off what you know is coming.

Then, when it's all over, the world has changed. The ocean, which at the beginning of the game separates the players on islands they can't leave, recedes, revealing land bridges to other areas and fertile new plains ready to be exploited.

"There was a temptation there at the beginning to have it set in the same world as *Endless Legend*," says Paxton of the decision to move to a new planet. "From a story perspective, it would have been a little hard because that world is completely frozen over at the end of *Endless Legend*, but you could have made that work from a narrative standpoint. The real thing is, we wanted to provide a new experience for the player. We want to provide new species that you're interacting with and get to play as. We wanted new pressures to be put on the player and new decisions to be made."

The retreat of the oceans is known in-game as Tidefall, and it's a one-way process. "Just like winter would come and go in *Endless Legend*, here the oceans recede," says Paxton. "But they don't recede and come back, because there's two things we really wanted to change

from *Endless Legend* here, one of which is that we wanted this mechanic to be something that changed the world forever.

"Winter would come and go [in *Endless Legend 1*], but the world would be left like it was when it's done. Here, we wanted the world change to happen and we wanted the map to forever bear the marks of that change. So, the ocean goes down, and then when the second Tidefall happens, the ocean goes down again and more and more land is exposed. You may have a land bridge that now connects two islands, you may have some new resources or enemies that are revealed from that, and you have to adjust your game. Your city that was safely protected and had choke points to it that you had blocked off may not be that way after the Tidefall happens.

"I really like the Tidefall mechanic for keeping it interesting and having the map change," says Paxton. "I'm one of these players who was a lot more interested in the very beginning of 4X games, so I'd start a lot of games of *Civ*, but I wouldn't always finish a lot of games of *Civ*."

COLD BREW

"The second big change that we really liked Tidefall for, more than winter, was that winter was largely punishing," continues Paxton. Indeed, the cold season in *Endless Legend*

brought penalties to movement which slowed the game down, to resources so food and Dust production was reduced, and had faction-specific effects too. Players could mitigate its effects to some extent by using technologies, skill, and special districts built within their cities, but especially in the early game it added extra challenge to all the exploration and extermination.

"Tidefall is the opposite," says Paxton. "When these new lands are revealed, it gives new opportunities and the player has to rethink his decisions, but it also gives all these new opportunities for the player.

There are new resources out there. There's a new place for the player to go grab and to found his next city. So we want it to feel like a prize for the player that has

reached that stage of the game."

Which raises a rather obvious question: where's the water going? After all, if it's rushing through a dimensional portal to who-knows-where, or through a giant chasm into the interior of the planet, that's going to have a pretty big effect on the world. But Paxton isn't saying. "That is a big mystery as to what is happening as we go through the course of the game," he says. "There is certainly a lot going on in Saiadha beyond just the oceans going away."

You might think, with all the water sloshing around at the

DARKNESS BLANKETS THE LAND FOR LONG PERIODS OF TIME

BELOW: Creatures to ride are common, and some even fly.



beginning of the game, that naval warfare would be a major part of *Endless Legend 2*'s opening hours, but it's not to be. Paxton explains that not only are the oceans dangerous, but building up a large navy could lead to frustrations for the player: "We don't have any naval units in this game. We didn't want the player going down that path. We didn't want to create a faction based on that path only to have, by the end of the game, the oceans largely gone and a whole land revealed, and suddenly I have this big, massive navy and they're all in this four-hex pond that is all that is left of the starting oceans."

As amusing as a bunch of destroyers in a duckpond would be, you can see his point. Instead, the retreat of the waters opens up new lands, resources and

even game mechanics. "At the first Tidefall, for example, you're going to find fortresses down there," says Paxton. "Fortresses have bosses that are controlling them, tyrants, and the tyrants may have henchmen that are guarding them, and you can't found

[new cities] in any of the territories that have a fortress in them until you clear it out. There's also valuable items that can be found at fortresses for equipping your heroes.

"At the second Tidefall, we introduce the concept of doom wraiths and corruption, so you'll start to see these creatures start to appear in the world that corrupt the land around them. They won't actively attack the player, but what they will do is move into your territories and dig in, and start to corrupt the land. You'll start to see these black noxious fumes come up, and any cities that you have in those territories will

begin to get penalties. They get larger and larger over time, so the player has a choice about how he's going to deal with these creatures."

The Early Access release of the game will be singleplayer only, though you'll be able to gang up on the minor factions in multiplayer when the full release comes around. There's a reason for this, says Paxton, "Most of our players play

singleplayer. We support multiplayer as we have in other *Endless* games, so if you wanna get together and play with your friends, that's fine. With the launch of Early Access we will be single player only just so we can focus all the feedback with players and get any issues taken care of, making sure that experience is great. But while we're in Early Access, before we release, we plan on putting out the multiplayer version so we can get players trying that out as well."

GREY ALL OVER

The asymmetric nature of an *Endless* game means that its factions all play very differently, and players may gravitate toward a favourite, perhaps one of the returning races from the previous game. None of them is exactly the good guys, however, as Amplitude prefers to deal in shades of grey rather than absolutes. There are some bad guys, however, "It's hard to find a good, cuddly spin to put on the Necrophage," says Paxton. "They want to go consume everything, um, they, they can eat the earth to get yields. They kill their enemies and use their cadavers to upgrade their city and their units."

"The Necrophage are a one-city faction, so they just have the hive of

THE RETREAT OF THE WATERS OPENS UP NEW LANDS AND GAME MECHANICS

BELOW: Saiadha is full of horrors, some of which crawl from the sea.





MEET THE FACTION



The Kin have a techno-Roman thing going on.



KIN OF SHEREDYN

3

Descended from interstellar explorers, the Kin of Sheredyn are a society determined to defend their homeland at any cost. Decades ago, they arrived on an ocean world with hopes of founding a colony, but were stranded on an isolated island instead. Battling relentless Necrophage attacks, survival became their mission.

Their legendary leader, Commander Garin, vanished while exploring ancient Endless ruins. Over time, she became a mythic figure among the Kin, with many believing in her prophesied return to deliver them from hardship.

Rooted in military tradition, the Kin field balanced and durable armies. Their unity is their strength – shields absorb damage while archers and cavalry strike decisively. Core units can specialise through branching upgrade paths, allowing tailored battlefield roles.

The Kin of Sheredyn embody a defensive playstyle. Their strength lies in industrial development and impregnable defenses. Fortresses and disciplined troops protect every inch of their territory. As their zeal grows, powerful bonuses become available. And when all seems lost, the Chosen can be summoned – elite warriors clad in devastating mech suits, capable of turning the tide with overwhelming force. Together, they stand unyielding against any foe.

MEET THE FACTION



Aspects wear coral as a sign of their wealth.



ASPECTS

4

The Aspects are a faction devoted to harmony, balance, and peaceful coexistence with the peoples of Saiadha. They live in symbiosis with a living coral that connects them through a vast psychic network called the Chorus, allowing them to communicate and reach consensus.

This unity was disrupted by a mysterious disaster known as the Great Dieback, which devastated the coral reefs and weakened many Aspects' connection to the Chorus. Now, they must nurture the coral back to health to restore their realm and help bring balance to the world once more.

Ideal for players who prefer economic growth and exploration over warfare, the Aspects expand not through traditional camps, but by placing coral spores. These spores spread across the map, turning tiles into coral-overgrown zones that offer vision, resource bonuses, and unique strategic advantages.

Diplomatically gifted, the Aspects can influence or even force treaties based on how much coral other empires exploit. Militarily, they focus on teamwork – units working in tandem to increase effectiveness. Their army includes scouts, archers, cavalry, and flying behemoths. Though peaceful by nature, the Aspects are capable of defending themselves if needed, and thrive best in cooperative relationships with other factions.



» their queen and their main resource is the bodies of their enemies, so they're very incentivised to go out and fight as a warmongering faction. But I think the most unusual one, and the one I'm really liking right now, are the Aspects. They're diplomats, and we've had diplomatic factions in our games before, so they tend to do well more by negotiation than by brute force, and they have a couple of powers that allow them to do that. One is that they can force a treaty on another player by paying a bunch of influence, so they build up a lot of influence and then if the Necrophage are attacking them, they can force the Necrophage to go to peace, which no other faction can. They can also freely assimilate minor factions."

This gets them new units and heroes depending on how much of the minor faction's population they have in their cities, and may also unlock extra bonuses and improvements. Unlike in *Endless Legend 1*, minor factions in this game aren't constantly at war with the player, and can be left alone or dealt with diplomatically. Until the monsoon, that is, when all the little guys become enraged.

Another faction out of the four currently announced – a fifth is coming, but still under wraps – is The Last Lords. These ghostly vampires are an evolution of the Broken Lords from the previous game, and are completely dependent on Dust, a resource used in *Endless Legend* and *Endless Space*. "A [Last Lords] player won't even see food on the map," says Paxton. "They don't use food at all. They are these ghostly, vampiric knights in these hollow suits of armour. You'll see their spirits floating within the armour and they don't eat, they don't need food. They are powered by Dust.

"So when you are playing as them, you definitely feel the effect of it. Your cities will not grow, you will not get new population in them, unless you pay Dust for that to happen. Their units do not heal unless you pay Dust. Which is great if you have a ton of Dust, you've set up your early economic game very strongly and you have lots of Dust coming in. Then suddenly it's, 'All right, let's plan a new city, let's buy five population for it.' Nobody else can do that. Everybody else has to wait for food to come in and for their cities to slowly grow. Everybody has to wait for their

armies to heal over a couple of turns. So economic players love The Last Lords. If you play a good economic game you have lots of power at your fingertips to make things happen."

FIGHT ON THE BEACHES

There's also going to be plenty of combat in *Endless Legend 2*, along with some nods to other games in the series, existing as they do in a kind of *Endless* shared universe. "One of the things I'm particularly proud of is that you may come across unique characters who are travelling and exploring Saiadha as you move across the world," says Paxton. "Some of our

factions have history either with *Endless Legend 1*, like The Last Lords, but also the Kin of Sheridan. They're from the United Empire, from the stars. Some of the

factions that you can play as are native to Saiadha, but The Last Lords and the Kin of Sheridan come from the greater universe."

Economics and combat are two of the traditional victory conditions of a 4X, but Amplitude is trying something new in *Endless Legend 2*.

"We have the typical [thing that] you can win when you get to the end turn," he says. "Whoever has the highest score by that time wins. Or if you defeat all of the other players, you win. But one thing that we're doing that's a little different here is there are also narrative victory

conditions that come up through the story. So as you play the game, you will meet characters. You will find out more about the world. And the player has the option to decide how he wants to deal with what is happening. Depending on what he chooses, that opens up victory conditions for [the game] to say, 'All right, you've chosen to do this. Here is how you can win the game if you do these things.'

"So, narratively, it doesn't just open up a path. It's not like *Endless Legend 1* where, if you're playing as this faction, you can win through their faction quest, although every

faction does have their own faction quest and a story that's being told. Every time you play, you get to choose, 'I may be playing the Kin, but this time I'm gonna choose this

path, this option. This is the narrative victory condition that I'm going to pursue in order to try to win.' That's something I haven't seen done, and I'm excited to get players in as part of the Early Access as well.

The wait for *Endless Legend 2* does indeed seem to be endless, with a delay for extra polishing announced while this feature was being prepared. Amplitude has a track record of pulling this kind of thing off, however, and so as the waters pull back and reveal the studio's latest work, we could be in for a monsoon of 4X strategy. ■

MINOR FACTIONS IN THIS GAME AREN'T CONSTANTLY AT WAR WITH THE PLAYER

BELOW: Minor factions live in isolated villages.



REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Utterly broken or offensively bad; no value.

Example *Big Brother*, *Mad Dog McCree*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Skull Island: Rise of Kong*, *ShellShock: Nam '67*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Underworld Ascendant*, *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort.

Examples *Sonic: Lost World*, *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III*, *Redfall*, *Lego Horizon Adventures*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed especially well.

Examples *Minecraft Legends*, *Senua's Saga: Hellblade II*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *New World*, *Skull and Bones*, *Forspoken*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Deep Rock Galactic*, *Star Wars Outlaws*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments. We love it.

Examples *Age of Wonders 4*, *Helldivers II*

90%-94% Important to PC gaming and ahead of its time.

Examples *Elden Ring*, *Factorio*, *Balatro*

95%-98% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Baldur's Gate 3*, *Minecraft*, *Metaphor: ReFantazio*

99%-100% Advances the human species. Provides a transcendent feeling not dissimilar to the ending of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Point 'n' click

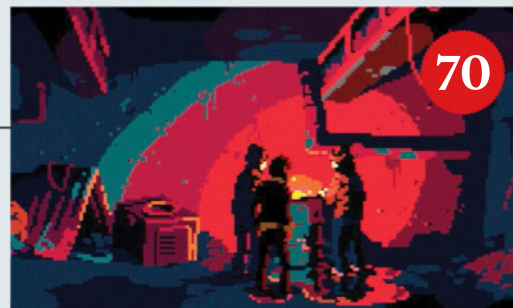
What a joy it is to see the now ancient point-and-click genre of games getting interesting new releases on PC like *The Drifter*. As our review details this issue, this is a unique pulp adventure thriller which, while not quite successfully landing everything it ambitiously attempts to do, delivers an exquisite moody atmosphere as well as stunning pixel art and a set of refined mechanical systems. It's worth playing in my opinion, for the right price.

We experience another blast from the past this issue, too, in the return of *Killing Floor*. The third incarnation of this blood-drenched FPS is as violent and fun as ever, but whether or not it still has the legs to go the distance in a sea of similar rival shooters remains to be seen. Again, if the price is right, it looks like it packs bang for your buck.

R. Jones

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
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**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**
Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's homeless reviewers...



SHAUN PRESCOTT
Specialist in
Trashcan fires

Currently playing
The Drifter

This month
Ate liver and onions
while wishing for a solid
gold house and rocket
car. Hey, it'll happen!



JOSHUA WOLENS
Specialist in
Scandi stealth

Currently playing
*Eriksholm: The
Stolen Dream*

This month
Snuck into a series of
saunas in Stockholm
and disrobed. Steamy!



TYLER COLP
Specialist in
Wire-fu

Currently playing
*Wuchang:
Fallen Feathers*

This month
Discovered a plume of
feathers growing out
of his butt. Don't ask.



MOLLIE TAYLOR
Specialist in
Gacha shenanigans

Currently playing
*Persona 5:
The Phantom X*

This month
Scrooge McDuck dived
into an all you can eat
buffet of anime hotties.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Tactical voodoo

Currently playing
Desperados III

This month
Made dolls of major
game publisher CEOs
and stabbed them in
the crotch. God's work.



AIM FOR THE ZED

KILLING FLOOR 3 is classic monster-shooting fun

By Elie Gould

I am but a simple creature, my idea of a good gaming time with friends is yapping about how our days have been while blowing monsters to smithereens, it's a good way to take the frustration out. So in that respect, *Killing Floor 3* does a great job. It places you and some friends into the heart of a horde of zeds with various weapons and says, "Have at it".

Killing Floor 3 is exactly what you would expect. It's you and a bunch of guns against hordes of bioengineered monsters. The matches are made up of five waves, with a boss fight at the end. Regardless of whether it's just you playing solo or with a team in multiplayer, things can get quite hairy in the later stages.

Luckily, you can stock up on ammo and meds after each wave, upgrading your weapons with different mods that you've crafted between matches. It can take some time to find and craft the weapon that works best for you. I tried to prioritise handling and reload speed as these are two stats that I found the most lacking with the base weapons provided.

But otherwise, *Killing Floor 3* is a very easy game to pick up, like most shooters, any practice you have at

hitting heads will translate well here. Although learning how to crowd control the swarms of zeds is an important skill.

It also feels as cool as it sounds to blast zeds to bits. Tripwire has used a new gore system, which it's calling MEAT, that lets you dismember zeds in various ways. The graphics complement this as you can see every single chunk of brain and skull flying out of a dead zed's

You can see every single chunk of brain flying out of a dead zed's head

head. At one point, my team tore the legs off of the last enemy to slow it down, just so we could all complete our objectives before the next wave began.

Unfortunately, even the coolest action sequences can get a little old. Waves may contain different grunts every time, but they can still become very predictable, easy to handle and therefore boring.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A co-op or solo action-horror FPS which sees you take down hordes of monsters

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Tripwire Interactive

PUBLISHER
Tripwire Interactive

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600G,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
steampowered.com/
app/1430190/
Killing_Floor_3/

There are some optional story missions, which you can play by yourself or in a team, that can add a little more variety to matches, but there's only about four hours' worth of content there – you can blast through it pretty quickly. The missions see you work through various tasks – usually involving searching through corpses – and finish the run on a survival mode, lasting up to five waves of zeds. These aren't particularly memorable – the gist of it is that Nightfall Operations saves the world from a bioengineered disaster one corpse rummage at a time.

But progression in *Killing Floor 3* isn't centred around a story that you need to complete – instead, it's largely achieved through levelling up each strategist.

WHO'S WHO

There are six strategists to choose from, each offering a different major skill, like Medic, Sharpshooter and the under-appreciated Firebug, who is just someone running around with some flamethrowers.

I've been maining Commando because I just can't get enough of Foster's lush English accent. His autofire drone gadget, Hellion, which can take down a bunch of zeds and a Fleshpound, is a big help when you're outnumbered. The Sharpshooter, known as Luna, has also been great fun. I underestimated her at first – it's so often the case that in games, long-ranged fighters suffer in close-ranged scraps, but she can hold her own just as well as any when up against a swarm of zeds.

Firebug, Engineer and Medic are also solid choices for multiplayer combat, even if their firepower can't match Foster and Luna. The most interesting and quirky character, though, has to be the Ninja class, Nakata. Slicing monsters up with an electric-blue katana and hitting headshots with kunais is just too cool to pass up on.

DRAMA QUEEN

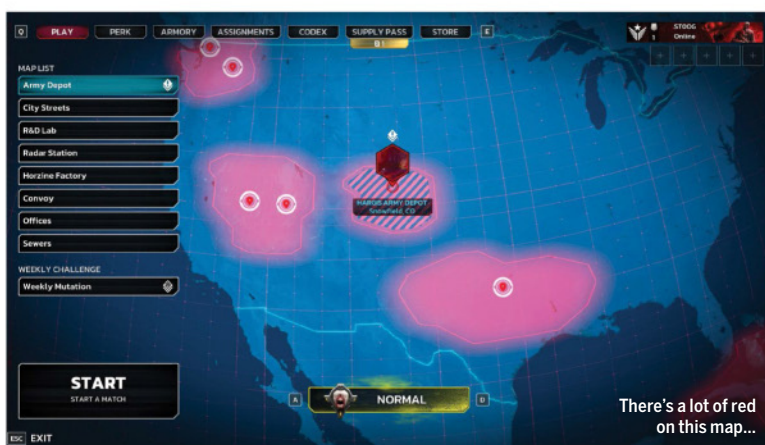
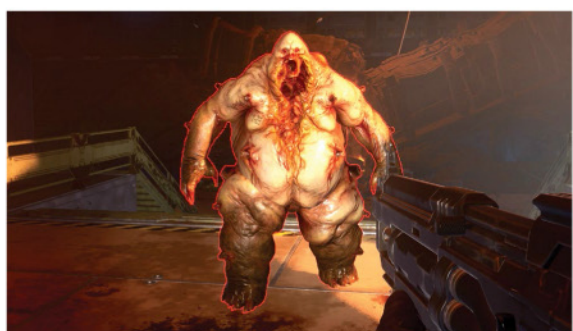
What makes the Queen Crawler so annoying?

1 Barging me into a corner so her hatchlings could gnaw on my ankles, hindering my ability to escape.

2 Leaping up into the sky faster than my mouse sensitivity could bear.

3 Teleporting away into some gloom as soon as I get close to killing it or manage to pin it down even for a second.





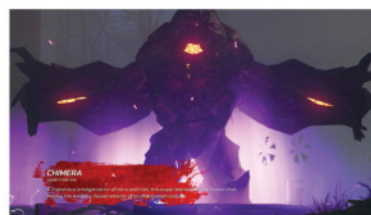
There's a lot of red on this map...



ABOVE: Everyone split up and look for clues.

UPPER LEFT: He's just standing there, menacingly!

LEFT: Just follow the blood trail.



X295 Wraith

15/125

1 1

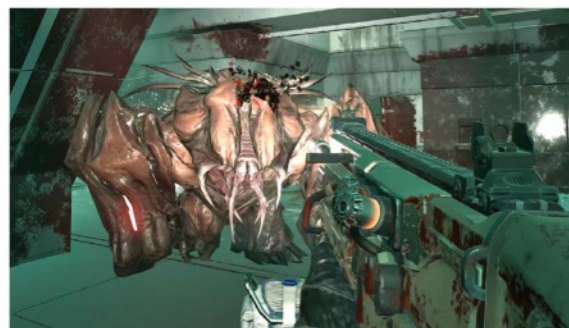
X G 4



IMPALER

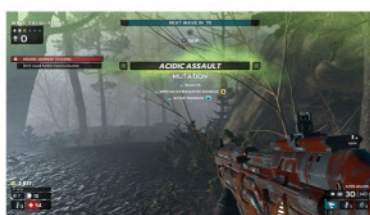
SUBJECT: ABR-400

Known for its relentless brute strength, this sturdily-built zed leaves a trail of devastation with its head blade and missile barrages.



UPPER RIGHT: I think I'm in danger.

BELOW: A slow motion bloodbath.



He's had better days.



When levelling up the strategists, you get to pick a new passive perk out of one to three options every two levels. One might offer a max ammo increase, while another lets you destroy enemy weak parts for gadget activation energy, making it faster to access Commando's Hellion.

There are passives up until level 30 right now, so maxing out a character's skill will take some time, approximately 25 hours, and then you have to do it for five other strategists. But as you unlock and upgrade more perks, your proficiency increases, which will give you further bonuses like increased fire rate or reload speed.

THE LONG HAUL

Even when you've managed to do that, there's still the difficulty levels to master. Normal is pretty much a walk in the park if you're playing in a team, prime head-empty yap session with friends, but it can get a little dicey in the later waves if you're solo.

Then there's hard and Hell on Earth. While there'll certainly be *Killing Floor* veterans who are able to jump in at Hell on Earth straight away, and somehow last through all the waves and the boss fight, that certainly isn't me.

After beating a round on hard, I got way too overconfident and decided to give the hardest difficulty a shot. Everything was going well for about two seconds, and then a wave of zeds hit me, accompanied by a busload of Husks that turned me into BBQ, gangs of Bloats that covered me in irradiated gunk, and Scrakes, which would hook me back in every time I managed to make some distance from the horde.

It didn't go very well, and it was pretty gruelling. But that's a good thing. I want a high skill ceiling for *Killing Floor 3*, it gives me more of an incentive to play and practice with the goal of beating a level on Hell on Earth in mind.

It's all about just finding what works, both by yourself and in a team. One of my favourite tricks, which has quickly become my go-to way for dealing with one of the bosses, the Impaler, is to kite it around a tight circle. I sometimes use a tank, but as long as it can't charge

you down from a distance, you'll save yourself from getting hit by what is essentially a speeding truck. The Impaler also has missiles which it can launch from its arms, but if you're constantly standing behind something, it won't fire them at you – checkmate, loser.

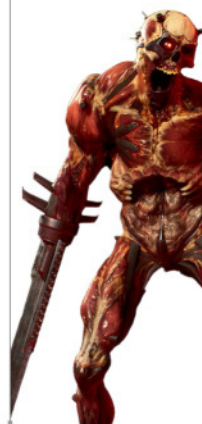
But running around in circles does nothing to quell the rage of the Queen Crawler. This mire-infused boss is like a big and angry ant that'll charge headfirst into you and shove you into a corner or off a ledge. She also deploys a ton of little

hatchlings, which become the most annoying thing on earth as they gnaw on your ankles.

Instead of trying to create any space between yourself and the Queen Crawler, it's just best to pummel her with as much damage as you possibly can. Trust me, she can close any gap you manage to make in seconds, so the only port of call is a battle of attrition, trying to kill her before she ends you.

THIN ICE

The skill ceiling may be high, but there is an issue in the interim, after the first ten hours or so, progression slows down slightly, and this is where games can get repetitive and boring.



Like any multiplayer game, playing with friends can help this massively, but without that, *Killing Floor 3* does fall into a bit of a lull.

It's also not the most creative shoot 'em up game around, and it doesn't do a whole lot to separate itself from the multiplayer FPS crowd. It's not something that grabs me and makes me want to play it every spare second I have, but in moderation, I still enjoy what time I do spend with it.

It's a great way to pass the time with friends who also enjoy executing monsters as much as you do, and if you're ever at a loss for what to do, you can always test yourself with a new strategist or a harder difficulty setting.

LOOKING AHEAD

But it also seems like part of the empty space in *Killing Floor 3* has been left on purpose. Tripwire has already announced its post-launch plans for the game. There's going to be a rearmament update with new weapons and mods, and a Season 2 that adds a new map, new zed, and a specialist called DJ Scully. Then, 2026 will see two more seasons with more maps, bosses and an assignment campaign.

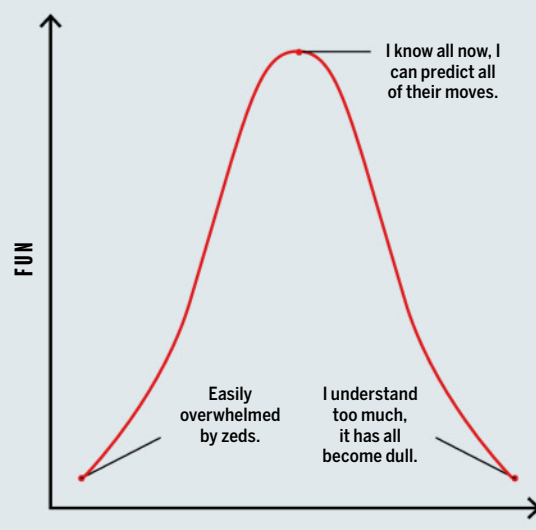
Killing Floor 3 isn't inventive now, but hopefully, as Tripwire adds more content in the future, it will begin to experiment more with the premise and shake things up a bit. I'd love to see something like a colosseum mode where you just get plunked into an arena with some friends to face all of the bosses at once. But maybe I'm just a bit twisted.

If you're on the fence, it may be worth waiting a while until more content is added further down the line and when there's maybe even a sale on. I don't think I could convince my friends to spend £35 right now on a game they aren't sure they'll play a great deal.

But if you're a fan of *Killing Floor* and everything the previous games had to offer, then you should check *Killing Floor 3* out – even if it's just to enjoy the same chaotic fights with better graphics. ■

ROLLERCOASTER

The Killing Floor 3 ride



PC GAMER VERDICT

Killing Floor 3 is fun, quick to pick up and while there'll always be a place for gory shooters, they are a dime a dozen.

74

PRETTY SNEAKY SIS

ERIKSHOLM: THE STOLEN DREAM's Scandinavian stealth is too strict for its own good

By Joshua Wolens

Eriksholm: The Stolen Dream will dupe you. An isometric stealth game that puts you in control of multiple characters who each have their own abilities? You know what this is, surely? You'll think to yourself, "This is a *Commandos*, this is a *Desperados*, this is a game about combining and applying your characters' skillsets to creatively overcome obstacles." And you'll be wrong. Despite appearances, *Eriksholm* is a strict, tight, and mostly linear thing.

There's more in common with *Hitman Go* than *Shadow Tactics* here: the job before you is not figuring out your own solution to its artisanal, bijou stealth encounters – it's poking at them until you figure out the precise solutions the devs intended, and getting spotted is an instant failure. Trying to cheese any of them invariably means a swift end and a return to an admittedly generous checkpoint.

So it's more stealth puzzle than stealth sandbox, but within those confines it's satisfying to figure out what each encounter wants from you, even if it doesn't feel especially creative. And gosh, what a looker. Never before have Scandinavian cops been so lustrously lit, their twitches and grimaces so minutely animated.

19TH-CENTURY 999

For its first few chapters, *Eriksholm* has you play exclusively as Hanna, an orphan girl who has recovered from Heartpox, the plague that's ravaging the game's pseudo-Sweden.

Hanna's convalescence was overseen by her brother Herman, and the two get all of five minutes together before they get separated and the neighbourhood finds itself infested with cops. Herman's been up to something while Hanna's been in her sickbed and the gendarmes aren't happy about it, and now it's on her to figure out what and reunite with him.

These earliest chapters are the strongest. All Hanna can do is sneak, hide in shadows and use a blowpipe to knock foes out. Her superpower,

really, is her organic ties to and knowledge of her community. She knows the shortcuts and secret passages, and her neighbours look the other way as she scurries over their rooftops.

Meanwhile, the cops are an alien and unwelcome presence, infuriating the locals while Hanna breezes easily over, under and past them. It's a great local story – told as much through

gameplay as it is through the dialogue you overhear from the town's alcove – of a kind of natural community solidarity.

The cops are an unwelcome presence, infuriating the locals

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Isometric stealth, Swedish-style

EXPECT TO PAY
£34

DEVELOPER
River End Games

PUBLISHER
Nordcurrent Labs

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 3700x, 32 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
eriksholmgame.com

The game doles out new gameplay elements smartly as it goes on, and even as the story lost me I found my interest at least piqued by the new talents I was getting. Adding Alva to your crew lets you smash light sources and clamber up drainpipes, while the late addition of Sebastian finally gives you the ability to just choke out guards from behind. Almost every new chapter adds some new gameplay wrinkle, challenging you to integrate a new skill into your toolbox to overcome the ever-more complex stealth puzzle boxes.

But when it comes time to put those skills to use? Every encounter feels fine-tuned to fail any attempt at outside-the-box thinking. Tightly honed patrol patterns mean you can't quite get bodies into cover before being spotted by a guard who spins around at the last nanosecond before you're safe. Alva can distract guards with her slingshot, sure, but she can't make them move using it unless the level is explicitly designed to allow it.

They're not badly designed encounters. I felt smart when I cracked them and had fun in the process of doing so, but the trial-and-error means you run into an issue time and again where things feel like they ought to work, but don't, and that they would work in a game that kept a looser grip on the player.

It's an almost *Call of Duty*-ish approach to stealth game design that doesn't 100% work. But by its nature, stealth precludes the kind of bombast that might keep you engaged through a *CoD* shooting gallery.

There's lots to like in *Eriksholm* even if most of it never tips over into excellence. You can feel the bones of a special *Eriksholm 2* in there, just beneath that sun-starved skin. ■

01! 01! Anatomy of an officer

1 BEADY EYES
Completely foiled by shadow, waist-high boxes, or distances above about 20 feet.

2 TRUNCHEON
They never actually use these (the game just ends if you get seen), but it probably makes them feel nice and safe.

3 DRESS BLUES
A visual marker to separate them from your neighbours, even from a sky-high isometric viewpoint.

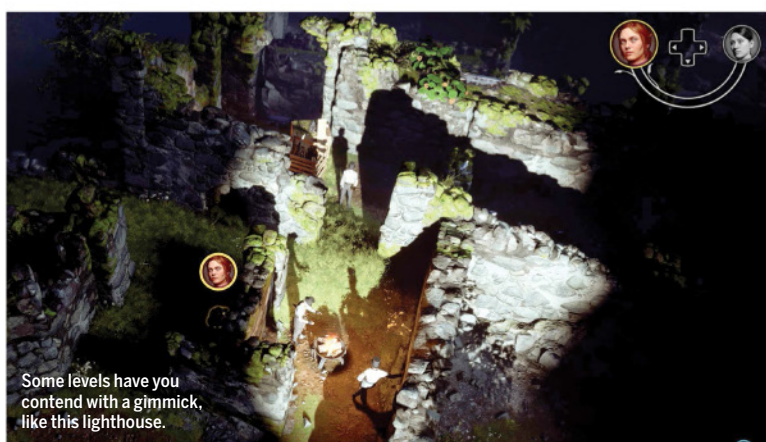


PGAMER VERDICT

Beautiful, but *Eriksholm's* stealth feels too constrictive to reach greatness.

77

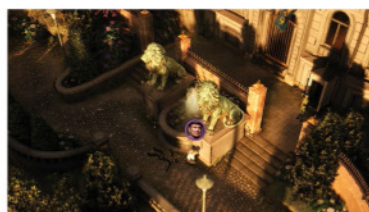
Eriksholm's performances are really top-notch.



Some levels have you contend with a gimmick, like this lighthouse.



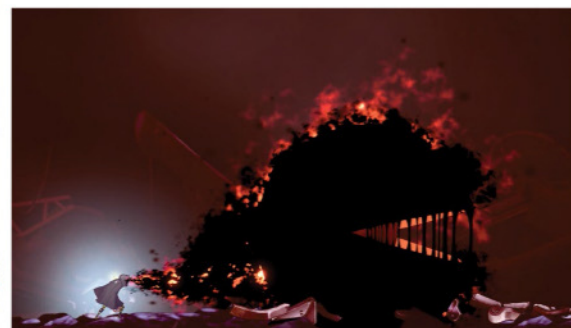
FAR LEFT: Thank god someone left all these conveniently placed boxes lying around.



The city feels big, ramshackle, and lived-in.



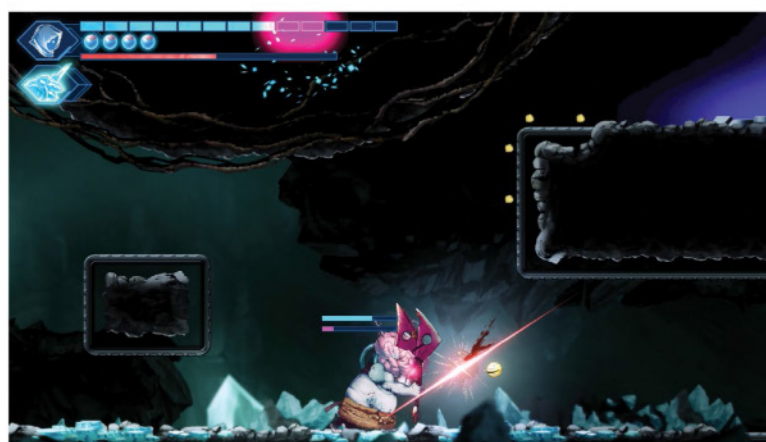
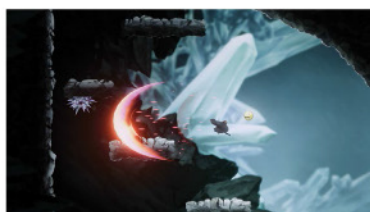
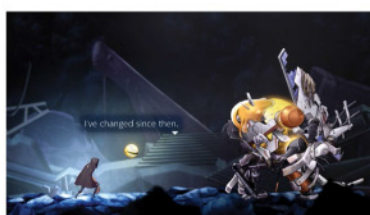
Guys, I'm starting to think this isn't our daddy's Pac-Man...



RIGHT: Pac-Man's ghosts now pilot/possess mechs. Progress?

FAR RIGHT: This bit looks great! If only it were playable...

BELOW: Some classic Pac-Man munching to remind you that you're not just playing this month's millionth Metroidvania.



WHACK-A WAKKA WAKKA

Pac-Man gets entertainingly miscast in grimdark Metroidvania **SHADOW LABYRINTH**

By Abbie Stone

Not since Bob Hoskins' Mario shoved his face down a woman's top have I witnessed such a bizarrely adult reimagining of a family-friendly character. While *Shadow Labyrinth* never goes that far this is still a game in which Pac-Man helps you slaughter monsters with brains on the wrong sides of their skulls. Then he helpfully swallows their spines afterwards so you can spend them at the shop.

Well, technically it isn't Pac-Man. Here your companion is called Puck, a cute nod to what was almost Pac-Man's name/a helpful distancing of this monster from being considered the real deal. Because Puck is a manipulative, untrustworthy devil on your shoulder who's unlikely to be fronting any Saturday morning cartoons anytime soon. You actually play as someone Puck summoned from another dimension to help with their shady quest, and Puck keeps referring to you as Number Eight. Brrr.

From the moment you pick up a sword it becomes clear that this is going to be a slightly more routine adventure than the oddball premise suggests. Combat's a traditional hacky slashy affair, although Puck does enjoy swallowing the corpses afterwards. Chow down on enough fallen foes and you'll be able to turn into a giant invincible mech with a Pac-Man centre. Goofy fun, though I'd have liked to have seen munching woven into the combat more.

After an overly linear opening few hours, the planet finally opens up, revealing a solid Metroidvania core. It's full of great navigation puzzles, platforming challenges, and poring over the map for secrets. And it's huge too. There's easily 40 hours of game here, even if a lot of that is because the difficulty curve suddenly decides to take inspiration from Pac-Man's horrible spiky mouth during the brutal climax.

So *Shadow Labyrinth* is an easy game to enjoy moment to moment,

albeit with the niggling sense that you've played a lot of this before. *Hollow Knight*'s air-dash makes its obligatory appearance, along with the usual double jump and hookshot.

All solidly implemented but there's long stretches where you could be playing basically any Metroidvania from the last few years.

The game gets more interesting when it leans into the *Pac-Man*

of it all. Find and activate blue rails and suddenly you switch to playing as Puck, munching his way along them. A novel way to explore, and

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A Pac-Man Metroidvania, for some reason

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Bandai Namco

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

REVIEWED ON
Asus ROG Ally

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bandainamcoent.com/games/shadow-labyrinth

later sections that have you switching between the two playstyles make for some great platforming.

MAZED AND CONFUSED

Then there are the maze levels. They're essentially inspired remixes of the original game, with smart new ideas like platforms that can be weaponised when you slam into them, and weapons like a decoy Pac-Man that the fine people of 1980 would have killed for. The strict five-minute timer is a blessing and a curse here, as it's not always obvious what you're supposed to be doing. But the briefness of these stages usually makes the pull of one more go when you mess up hard to resist.

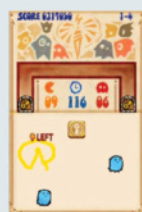
These sections also have terrific energy. The dance music thumps merrily, with the colourful visuals and sound effects practically cheering you on as you gobble up ghosts. And then you return to *Shadow Labyrinth* proper, with its mournful, forgettable tunes (wait... was there music?) and uninspired art style. It's hard not to feel a little deflated that more of the all-singing all-dancing tone of the mazes couldn't have seeped into the tone of the main adventure.

An overly-talky technobabble festival, rife with clichés and dull stock characters. Even the Steam achievements have text like "in war, the size of the hand wielding the sword matters not".

It's tough getting dramatic range out of a character who's a melon with a slice missing, and there's nothing in here as moving as Pac-Man meeting his one true love in the first cutscene. The fact that *Shadow Labyrinth* hopelessly tries just reminds you what a silly idea a sombre reimagining was in the first place. ■

PAC-PICKS

Four other Pac-Man spin-offs



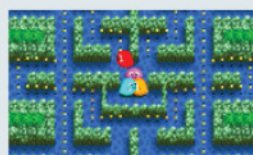
PAC-PIX
Ingenious DS game in which you have to draw Pac-Man into existence with the touchscreen and stylus.



PAC-MAN CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION
Update of the 1980 original that's a clear influence on *Labyrinth*.



PAC-N-ROLL
Roll Pac-Man around mazes and try not to think about his poor mouth each rotation.



PAC-MAN ARRANGEMENT
Another great remake of the original, hidden behind the world's most boring name.

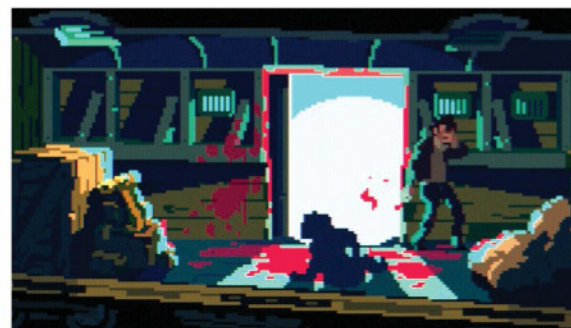
PC GAMER VERDICT

Shadow Labyrinth from Bandai Namco is a good Metroidvania trapped in the shadow of too many better ones.

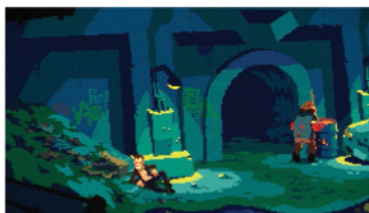
73



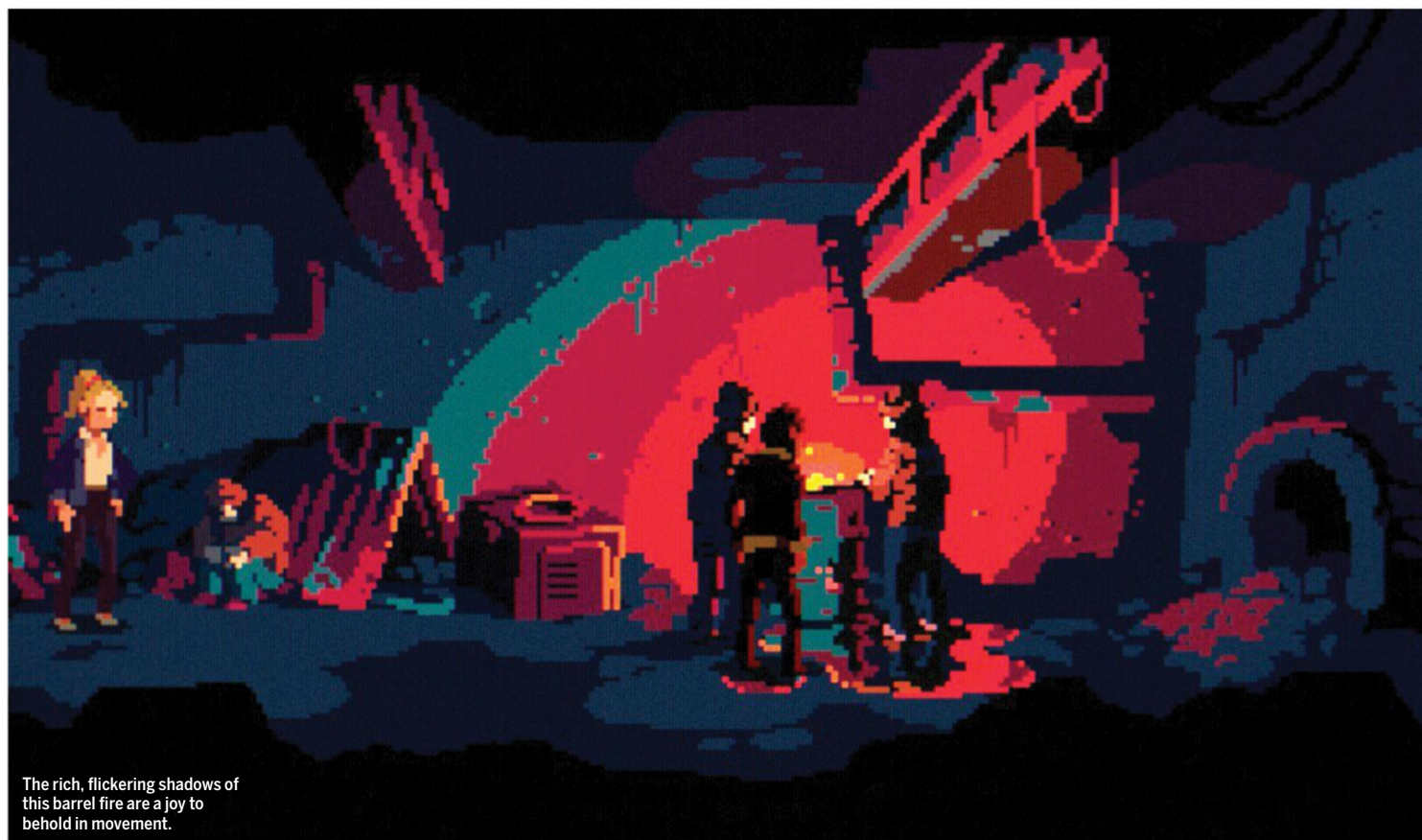
Naturally, the city's major newspaper is based in the dodgiest part of town.



RIGHT: Like in all good thrillers, there is inevitably a flamethrower involved.



All characters are fully-voiced, usually in rich Australian accents.



The rich, flickering shadows of this barrel fire are a joy to behold in movement.

PACIFIC DRIFT

THE DRIFTER is a gorgeous point-and-click with a noir-ish edge

By Shaun Prescott

We meet Mick Carter as a homeless drifter. Due to some unspecified past trauma, he's abandoned his settled domestic life in a nameless Australian city for a self-flagellating transient existence. He's en route to home, where he's been beckoned to attend his mother's funeral. He does so reluctantly, because it draws him closer to a past he's deliberately abandoned.

Shit hits the fan almost immediately. Not only is Mick forcibly ejected from his train carriage by a mysterious, possibly supernatural presence, but he's then framed for the murder of a homeless man in the seedy railway underpass he finds himself in. At first, *The Drifter* promises to be a dark character study wrapped in a mystery, but it proves to be more – to its detriment.

The Drifter bills itself as a “pulp adventure thriller” and it wastes no time living up to that descriptor. Carter is a depressive but nevertheless oddly calm protagonist, with a familiar Australian matter-of-factness about him. He's downcast, but not entirely ruined. In fact, when a hi-tech conspiracy begins to loom he proves quite resourceful: *The Drifter's* point-and-click trappings generally demand MacGyver-like logic, which is to say, an ability to use mundane objects to solve seemingly insurmountable problems.

But *The Drifter* has quieter, ostensibly more complex ambitions. At first the world presents as a richly down-at-heel urban sprawl. Its lavishly illustrated environs are a potent combination of John Carpenter blight with film noir tactics. Powerhoof's pixel art strives towards a painterly, oddly curvaceous semi-realism, darkness and undulating shadows rendering a bleak and forbidding world that still manages to be tastefully colourful and varied. The studio has a distinctive approach to pixel art, which is no small feat.

The point-and-click elements are familiar. Puzzles tend to boil down to executing actions in the right order, combining found objects to make a jury-rigged tool, or compelling

certain events to occur to accommodate my objectives. Powerhoof has devised a clever user interface that takes a lot of the tedious guesswork out while also providing information about present circumstances,

lest one lose their way.

The Drifter is a finely wrought point-and-click adventure, with gorgeous art – and the latter cannot

Puzzles tend to boil down to executing actions in the right order

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A point-and-click pulp adventure thriller with true grit

EXPECT TO PAY
£17

DEVELOPER
Powerhoof, Dave Lloyd

PUBLISHER
Powerhoof

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600H,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
thedriftergame.com

be over-emphasised – but its pulp tendencies sit a bit askew from some of its more severe themes. The source of Carter's jiltedness rubs awkwardly against the high concept sci-fi narrative, which of course involves time travel, albeit towards bleaker ends than the usual “just one more chance” fantasy.

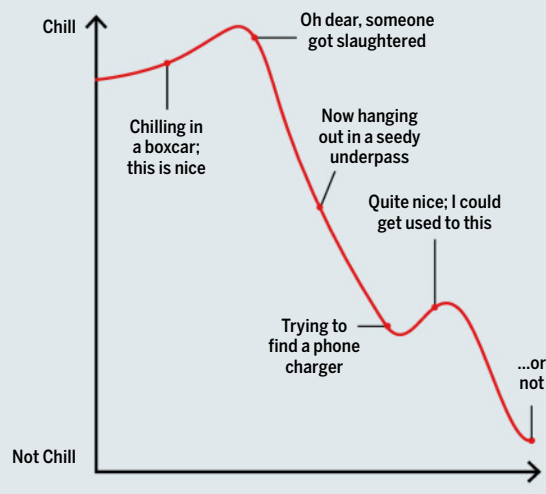
It's a refreshingly ruthless, refreshingly human, framing of regret, but as *The Drifter* moves into labyrinthine sci-fi territory, and as its strands coil around a conspiracy much larger than Carter's circumstances, the game loses sight of the emotional stakes in favour of the procedural unfolding of wily mad scientist baloney. As the story progressed, I felt more and more remote from Mick Carter.

To Powerhoof's credit, this partial failure has a lot to do with the limitations of genre conventions; within the strictures of a loosely side-scrolling and panned out presentation, the subtleties other mediums could use to squeeze feeling out of Carter aren't available. Once we've left the forbidding, narrowed-in cityscapes in favour of more outlandish ‘pulpish’ environs there are fewer opportunities to feel as if we're commandeering a genuinely shaken character; Carter turns into a fish-out-of-water problem solving avatar with depressive posture.

Can a point-and-click adventure be good if its story doesn't stick the landing? Powerhoof's sublime art direction give it potential to tell stories like this without resorting to cliché, and the studio's approach to UI and puzzle design is impeccable. *The Drifter* is a great piece of design, but it needed to avoid the shelter of pulp to be a captivating adventure. ■

UNCHILL-OMETER

Mick Carter is always either screaming or relaxed



PC GAMER VERDICT

A gorgeous and moody adventure with impeccable art, but its pulp leanings undermine its best qualities.

70

FULL-LIFE

ABIOTIC FACTOR is an instant survival classic and one of the best I've played in years

By Morgan Park

I'll just get it out in the open: *Abiotic Factor* is one of the greatest survival crafting games ever made and by far my favourite. In a year of early access time with friends, we've witnessed the GATE Cascade Research Facility and its horrors expand in real time. Updates have proven frequent and excellent, unlocking huge sectors of the map while introducing transformative technology, mysteries, conveniences and, most importantly, fishing.

I'm not usually one to play games before they hit 1.0, but *Abiotic Factor*'s premise was too good to pass up. You play as scientists trapped in a secret underground facility amidst a Black Mesa-style disaster in the year 1997. That's some potent PC gaming catnip, but the *Half-Life* trappings aren't just wallpaper. Deep Field Games takes the survival framework of *Valheim* and *Project Zomboid* and fully commits to the idea of nerds with zero survival skills and male pattern baldness thwarting an interdimensional apocalyptic invasion with nothing but office equipment, PhDs and gallons of coffee.

WORK LIFE BALANCE

Many of our 80+ hours in *Abiotic Factor* were spent tiptoeing down the

cold, unfeeling halls of GATE while gripping crossbows made out of metre rulers and eating crisps pilfered from vending machines. *Abiotic Factor*'s story and the thrust of its central quest, is about escape. We've raided nuclear reactors, charted other dimensions, fired lasers at 30-foot monsters and robbed a train in the name of fixing a busted elevator, but at least half of that time

was also spent building a home base.

It's become my favourite place in all of videogames. The heart is the same little craphole we built on our very first day using just a workbench and some storage boxes in the cafeteria security office. Its slow but steady expansion is a reflection of *Abiotic Factor*'s fantastically long tech tree constantly feeding us weird things to build.

Nerds with male pattern baldness thwarting an invasion

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Co-op survival and crafting with scientists

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Deep Field Games

PUBLISHER
Playstack

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9 9900KS,
32GB RAM,
Nvidia GeForce
RTX 2080 Super

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
abioticfactor.com

We outgrew the security office and started building in the kitchen, where my friend spent afternoons preparing cursed alien burgers, soups, salad wraps and sushi to keep our bellies filled. The discovery of farmable crops from the Anteverse spilled operations into the outer cafeteria entryway. Before we knew it, our barricaded fortress of increasingly dangerous inventions – laser turrets, void toilets, an alien we trapped in a tube – doubled as a cosy museum of our adventures.

The brilliant twist of *Abiotic Factor*'s handcrafted corporate environments is that there are no blank canvases to work with. You're forced to carve comfort out of bland spaces with pre-existing dimensions and purposes, which takes the pressure off players like me who typically make a boring square in *Minecraft* and call it a day. You're not building a home as much as moving into an existing one, a distinction that proved fulfilling. In one satellite base, we spent a whole night converting a featureless lab into a gourmet kitchen/firing range with cutting boards, ammo depots and fridges.

It helps that *Abiotic Factor*'s map is overflowing with furniture, photos, knick-knacks and decorations that we'd find on expeditions and instinctively pocket. Were it not for our tastefully curated living room decor, shelf of collectible GATE figures and literal dozens of dog photos, our base would feel like any old workshop.

DRY MOUTH

Comfortable spaces aren't just a cosmetic flourish, because *Abiotic Factor* has so many systems, simulations and skills that go beyond your standard survival hunger meter. It's the only survival game I've played that rewards not just surviving, but thriving. Sleeping and pooping are hands-on activities with timing minigames. Standing by a heater helps you heal. Drinking coffee grants

LUNCH BREAK

The culinary delicacies of *Abiotic Factor*



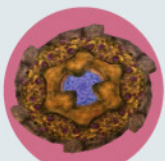
ANTEVERSE CHEESE

The sinful combination of alien milk sacs, anteverse juice and hydrochloric acid.



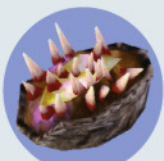
COSMOTO SALAD WRAP

Consider this healthy wrap made from space lettuce, Greyeb eyes and super tomatoes.



CARBUNCLE PIZZA

A pizza made by chopping up carbuncle guts and mixing them with some bread.



BAKED PESTATO

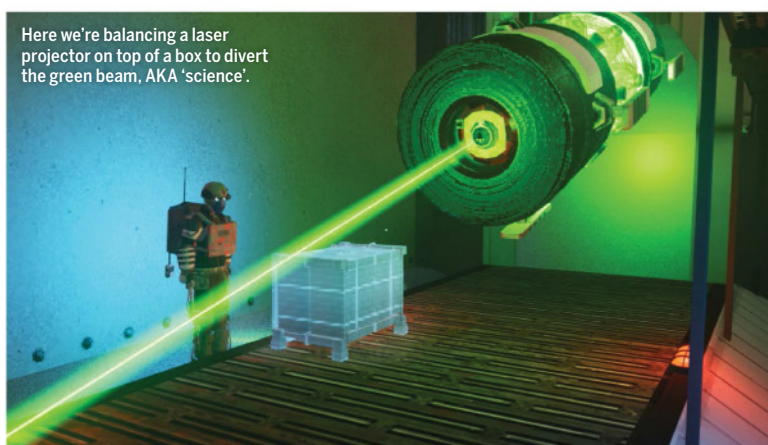
Turn lemons into lemonade by filleting those pesky pests and baking them inside a potato. Watch for spikes.



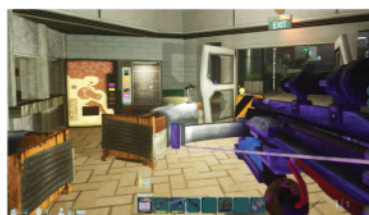
Wearing a chef hat makes you better at chopping up dead bodies.



Here we're balancing a laser projector on top of a box to divert the green beam, AKA 'science'.



LEFT: Since there are no lakes or oceans at GATE, you have to get creative with fishing spots.



SOMEONE WHO KNOWS ABOUT POWER CELLS

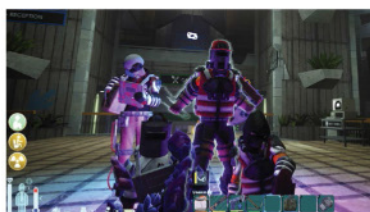


GATE scientists must be prepared for all myco hazards.



RIGHT: Abiotic Factor has one of the deepest and strangest cooking systems of any survival game.

FAR RIGHT: It doesn't look it, but Greyeb eyes can be cooked into a mean salad wrap.



cold resistance. Even sitting on a couch has the tangible effect of pausing fatigue buildup.

Linking normal human maintenance to the survival loop has this wonderful way of bringing the roleplay out of us. Normal conversations in *Abiotic Factor* include what's for dinner, how tired we are, or planning supply runs while sitting on a couch sipping sodas. It's the most lifelike survival game I've played, which is surprising given the constant presence of killer security bots, cultish militias and the Coworker, an NPC who walks on four legs.

I'm still surprised to discover new buffs and debuffs triggered by specific actions. Screw up too much during the sleeping minigame? Sorry, you're groggy (+30% fatigue). Recently eaten some good soup? Congrats, you're now Souper Satisfied (hunger depletes slowly for a while). That's all on top of a fun traits system that lets you sign up for both positive and negative bonuses at character creation. You can take more positive traits by also choosing more negative traits, which are still informing our playstyles in ways I never expected.

Buff Brainiac came in handy countless times when hauling 80 pounds of gear, but to afford it I also took Weak Bladder, a trait that earned me a reputation for constantly needing a bathroom in the middle of an expedition. If there was a toilet around, great, but if not, well... let's just say I earned the Accidents Happen achievement in record time.

Meanwhile, my friend chose Narcoleptic, a sleepy curse that plagued her for so long that she started adventuring while seated in a rolling chair to stave off exhaustion. Eventually she got around it by grinding Strength to carry around a military cot in her backpack.

EMPLOYEE REVIEW

Classes provide a template for how you could spec your scientist, but they're not prescriptive. You get better at whatever you're doing, be it sprinting, sneaking, shooting, or shaking vending machines.

I consider it a great sign that *Abiotic Factor* has so many weird and

intriguing combat options that all five of us ended up with different specialties: electrified blades, modified crowbars, throwing darts, a deadly disc launcher with the guts of an air compressor. I committed to ranged, beginning with a makeshift crossbow fitted out of rulers and rubber bands. I couldn't keep my

reticle steady for the longest time, but eventually I became the party's sniper.

Combat itself isn't stellar: clubs and crowbars have an unsatisfying 'bonk' that's a bit too close to classic *Half-Life*,

enemies are really spongy early on, there's not a lot of damage feedback and hit detection can be choppy if your host doesn't have great internet. The pipe clubs and kitchen knives that carried us through the early game graduated to laser swords, goo launchers, electro-magnetic crossbows and like 18 other mad scientist gadgets I don't want to spoil.

Abiotic Factor does have normal guns, but they're deliberately limited. Ammo is hard to come by and most guns aren't even usable until you upgrade them.

Abiotic Factor has so many weird and intriguing combat options

HEAD SPACE

What goes on in the mind of a GATE scientist?



OFFSITE

Finding a new building is always the most exciting part of a night, as the group fans out like a pack of dogs and pick apart every inch of it for story bits, characters to talk to and any furniture not nailed down. I'll never forget the night we finally punched through the Manufacturing wing by triggering a giant explosion, or our harrowing scuba dive in the Hydroplant, or the day a single sniper in a hallway wiped out our whole party, or the time we stepped through a portal into the Anteverse and discovered *Abiotic Factor* goes to way more places than just GATE itself.

These regular excursions into the unknown are so unique for a survival game. Not only do they break up the barrage of hallways, but they also serve as a sandbox for playing with genre. An early portal world, Flathill, is a survival-horror episode about avoiding the gaze of a 20-foot-tall skeletal monster in a residential neighbourhood. Another is a no-holds-barred throwdown with GATE's militarised cleaners on a runaway train.

Abiotic Factor encourages repeat trips to portal worlds by packing them with unique resources that reset every in-game week – this is the closest it gets to 'farming' since resources never replenish in the main facility. It's a disorienting combo of a game, catching both survival diehards and those desperate for anything *Half-Life*-shaped in its dragnet, but its magical moments aren't on an alien planet or in a crafting bench. It's the gaps that are special – the quiet moments between adventures where GATE's dreary soundscape becomes a backdrop for friends discussing story theories, what soup's ready on the stove, or where to go next.

I recommend playing with your best buds, and slowly. There's an unbelievable amount of stuff to do and the finale chapter, new to 1.0, is excellent. With major changes to the power curve like the Enhancement Bench, it might even be worth starting over. I know I will in a few years, because *Abiotic Factor* is a classic in the making. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Abiotic Factor is an unforgettable, interdimensional odyssey for you and your closest friends.

92

BACK FOR SPORE

MYCOPUNK is a mess, in the best kind of way

By Elie Gould

Mycopunk is about as chaotic as a co-op shooter can get. You work for a megacorporation which mines the planet of New Atlas for Saxonite. But after a fungus infects the world, you're sent down alongside other members of the New Atlas Hazard Crew to clear the way and gather helpful resources. Oh – and you're directed by Roachard Cox, your line manager who also happens to be a talking cockroach. Try not to think about it too hard, you'll be fine.

Mycopunk is full of clutch plays, chaotic fights, and good old-fashioned kiteing of enemies. It's probably the most fun I've had in a shooter for a long time, primarily because it manages to straddle the line of being difficult but not punishing.

When selecting one of the various mission types, you can also customise the difficulty. There are three swarm intensities to choose from, which'll alter how likely enemies are to overrun you. Then there are six different difficulty levels to pick from, Difficulty 1 is the easiest, providing the least amount of resources, and Difficulty 6 is the hardest, giving players the most resources and XP.

Being able to change swarm intensities and difficulty separately from each other lets you experience all the different missions at your own pace, in circumstances that let you enjoy Mycopunk to the fullest. Like having to deal with mountains of enemies piling onto you, but don't want them to pack too much of a punch? Pick a high swarm intensity at a low level, and so on.

Outside of difficulty, smart design choices (like removing the need to hunt for ammo) also make a world of difference. Instead of worrying about where I could find the next ammo cache like in other games, all I need to do to get more bullets is damage enemies with my other weapon.

I'm a huge fan of there being no stamina system, too. The enemy bots are pretty fast, so having the ability to keep on running is vital. But it's not

like you zip around whenever you feel like it. Instead, three of the four characters all have movement-based abilities on cooldown.

Scrapper (my fav) has a jetpack and deploys a grapple pole, which the whole team can use to launch themselves in the air. Wrangler has an air dash and a rocket lasso that can propel you forward. Glider has

a wingsuit that you can fly around with. Bruiser just deploys shields and

I'm a robot in a puffer jacket, being advised by a talking cockroach

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A co-op PvE shooter where you fight fungus

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Pigeons at Play

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600G,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/3247750/Mycopunk/

can ground slam, which emits a shockwave to damage enemies, so I'm sure he appreciates the infinite stamina more than anyone else.

RUN, SCRAPPER, RUN

These small tweaks remove stressors that some games tend to rely on – lesser games might hold sacred the myth that a shooter has to be gruelling or realistic. Meanwhile, in Mycopunk, I'm a robot in a puffer jacket, being advised by a talking cockroach – realism went out the window a long time ago.

But the fun doesn't stop when the mission does. The home base is huge, housing tons of games and what I can only assume are the developers' pets as screensavers all over the place, which is excellent. This is also when you upgrade your characters and kit. Instead of equipping upgrades after you unlock them, you need to squeeze them into a hive-shaped inventory.

Mycopunk shows a ton of promise, but that doesn't mean it's infallible. The progression can become a bit of a slog, and it can take a while to level up or collect enough resources to upgrade your kit. There's also definitely a cap as to how many missions you can do in a row before it all just blends into a violent blur. The variety in mission types only keeps things fresh for so long.

There are also some glitches, many of which the devs are aware of, but that doesn't make them any less annoying. I've been lasered by an Abomination through a wall more than once now – you're never safe, even when you think you are. But none of this ruins the fun, it's just something to bear in mind: the fungal growths of Early Access. ■

KNOCK 'EM DEAD

What could go wrong? Everything

1 HEADACHE

A giant hole in the side of my skull courtesy of a robot with a comically large claw – remember to destroy every part of the enemy bots, as others can nab them.

2 FRIED

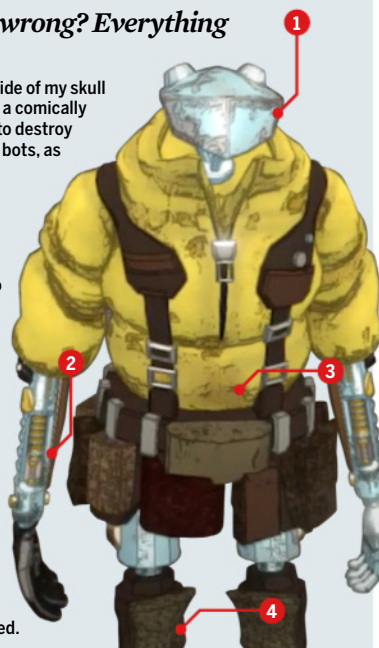
My right arm is all crispy because I accidentally walked into a laser beam while running away from a horde of bots.

3 TORN

Spliced across the abdomen after taking too much damage. I'll have to wait for one of my teammates to glue me back together.

4 TRAPPED

I stood on an exploding mineral that some sneaky bot dropped.

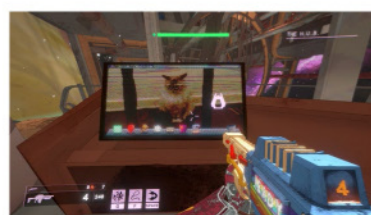


PC GAMER VERDICT

Mycopunk's smart design has made me remember what it's like to enjoy a co-op shooter again.

79

My friend carrying
my torso back
towards my legs.



FAR LEFT: Not how
I wanted my one to
one to go.

LEFT: Cat.
Enough said.



Death by one
million lasers.

SHORT ORDER CHEF

Make friends with food in **TALES OF THE SHIRE: A THE LORD OF THE RINGS GAME**

By Christopher Livingston

Bilbo Baggins' trip to Lonely Mountain (and back again) in *The Hobbit* was roughly 2,000 miles. In *Tales of the Shire: A The Lord of the Rings Game*, I feel like I've run at least half that distance without ever leaving the tiny town of Bywater. I cook, I fish, I farm – but most of my time is spent using my big ol' hairy feet to skip back and forth between the dozen hobbits who regularly need my help.

That's not unusual for a life sim – I sprint like crazy through *Stardew Valley*, too – but despite all the bustling around I do in Bywater, there's not quite enough to do to fill my days. Some of the activities are good ones: the cooking system is one of my favourite in games ever, and foraging for ingredients through the beautifully detailed Bywater is pleasantly chill, but fishing is too basic to be interesting and farming is a letdown.

ROAST MUTTON

In *Tales of the Shire*, you're a recent transplant to Bywater, a town so small the official hobbit government doesn't even consider it a real town. And who better to organise the locals into getting their act together than a complete stranger? Luckily, there's a great way for an outsider to earn the trust of the local halflings, and that's through their stomachs.

Cooking in *Tales of the Shire* is excellent – and yes, you can have all the meals Pippin helpfully listed in *The Fellowship of the Ring*: breakfast, second breakfast, elevenses, luncheon, afternoon tea, dinner and supper. Step into the kitchen and pick a recipe, then add the ingredients you've foraged or grown, like puffy mushrooms, shiny fruits and hearty vegetables, and those you've bought or traded for, like meat, cheese, flour and cream.

The ideal version of the meal you're making has a little target on your cooking HUD, and hitting it means adjusting the smoothness or

chunkiness of the dish (depending on how vigorously you chop the ingredients) as well as the crispness or tenderness (which can be fine-tuned in the frying pan,

saucepan, and other kitchen implements). While the stovetop is sizzling you can also mix in extra flavours at each step, adding sugar, salt, cinnamon, butter, and lots of herbs and spices to make flavour combos that improve

the quality of the meal.

It's a fun and tactile minigame I enjoy each time I do it: pouring some ingredients into a mixing bowl,

I just wish the rest of *Tales'* systems were as enjoyable as its cooking

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A cosy life sim set in a the small hobbit town of Bywater

EXPECT TO PAY

£29

DEVELOPER

Weta Workshop

PUBLISHER

Private Division

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7 9700K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4070 Ti

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

talesoftheshire.com

chopping others with a big cleaver, then flipping and tossing them in a sizzling pan. It takes a while to learn just how much or little to chop or fry each ingredient to precisely create the ultimate version of each dish, but even if you miss the mark, the finished meals are always look delicious: from sticky berry jams to crispy fish pies, to tarts filled with fruits and cream.

I just wish the rest of *Tales'* systems were as enjoyable as its cooking – and I wish there were more to do in general. Foraging is pleasant enough, especially because chasing butterflies and lightning bugs will lead you to hard-to-spot ingredients, a nice fairytale-style touch. The fishing minigame is a little too simple to be good, though, absent the layer of complexity of lures and bait most other life sims add.

Quests require a lot of running back and forth between hobbits to deliver messages and have short conversations. The main quest is a long one, to elevate the town to official status in the Shire, but to spread it out over the course of the game there are often gaps where you simply have to wait for the next part to begin by ending the day and starting the next. A lot of quests are of the 'the princess is in another castle' variety: while trying to track down a missing book, each hobbit I questioned sent me to another, and then another. It's a lot of running around, and frankly, I'd much rather be at home cooking.

With such a beautifully presented world and an excellent cooking system, it's a shame the rest of *Tales of the Shire* doesn't stack up that well. Gandalf sure loves the Shire, but I can't quite say the same. ■

FELLOWSHIP

Other games starring Hobbits



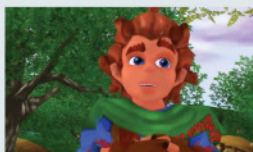
LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE

Be a burglar, blow pipeweed smoke rings, and have an epic adventure, just like Bilbo.



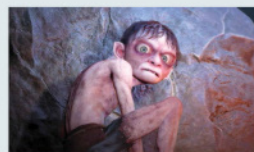
LEGO: THE HOBBIT

Fight trolls and orcs, solve puzzles with the dwarves, and explore Middle-earth.



THE HOBBIT

It's gonna be hard to find this adventure game gem from 2003, but it'll be worth it.



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: GOLLUM

We don't talk about this one. In fact, forget I even brought it up.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Tales of the Shire has great cooking and foraging systems, but not a lot else to keep you busy.

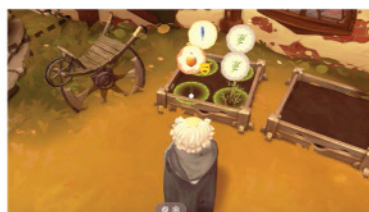
67

How tender a meal is depends on how long you fry it.



ABOVE LEFT: You'll find plenty of fishing spots. Eventually.

BELOW LEFT: Certain plants buff each other when grown together.



WONDER-FUL

PERSONA 5: THE PHANTOM X's gachafication works surprisingly well

By Mollie Taylor

I consider myself an insufferable *Persona 5* fan, but even I'm beginning to tire a little of the Phantom Thieves. If there's one thing Atlus knows how to do, it's milk the ever-loving god out of a videogame. I presume that's exactly how we ended up here: *Persona 5: The Phantom X*, a free-to-play gacha game developed alongside Perfect World subsidiary Black Wings Studio, which has dabbled in this sort of thing before.

It's bizarre, because *The Phantom X* looks like *Persona 5* (and sure does play like *Persona 5*) until I dare to delve a couple menus deep and its iconic stylised UI starts to drown in all the information-dense gacha nonsense I have a love-hate relationship with. Yet, despite my exhaustion with the setting and all-too familiar formula, I gotta admit: *The Phantom X* is pretty freakin' good.

TAKE YOUR TIME... AGAIN

After all, it really is much of the same. If it ain't broke, don't fix it, yada yada. Hell, the game even opens with the same cutscene as the original game, albeit with tweaks to transition it into its gacha counterpart.

There are palaces to explore, Mementos to dive into, personas to fuse, bonds to form, social stats to

grow, and calling cards to send as, once again, the Phantom Thieves. Though with a different cast taking up the mantle this time.

Even when *The Phantom X* does things differently, it's more a switchout than something brand-new. The obligatory animal sidekick is now an owl named Lufel – who also hangs around in your school bag and accompanies you to every place you visit

– while Shujin Academy has been sacked in favour of Kokatsu Academy.

This made the opening hours of *The Phantom X* a little frustrating for me, as someone who has sunk hundreds of hours into the original JRPG across half a dozen playthroughs. It covers a lot of old ground, and it doesn't help that the first several hours of the game are spent with what is one of the corniest

The obligatory animal sidekick is now an owl named Lufel

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A new band of Phantom Thieves in a gacha'd-up JRPG

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Atlus, Sega, Perfect World

PUBLISHER
Sega

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 3900XT, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070

STEAM DECK
Playable

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
persona5x.com

villains to ever be promoted from sidequest fodder to big bad.

He calls himself the Subway Slammer, and yes, it is just as dire as it sounds. He suffers from having terribly weak motivation which turns the serious topic of butsukari otoko ('bumping man' – a form of public sexual assault) into a shitpost machine. It's made even worse by the fact he feels like a worse version of the original *Persona 5*'s debut villain, acting as a diet Kamoshida. Weird harassment of women included.

SHIBUYA RETOLD

Thankfully, *The Phantom X* keeps things interesting enough with its new band of rag-tag rebels, even if their stories mostly backtrack over *Persona 5*'s main narrative beats. Protagonist Wonder is a similar blank slate to heroes of *Persona* past, but they're joined by the likes of spunky baseball prodigy Motoha Arai, foodie Shun Kano and disciplined class president Riko Tanemura.

Motoha in particular carries the early story. She's loosely connected to the first boss, serving as his motivations for being a giant dickface, and prevents his introduction from being a total flopfest. At least on her part, it gives plenty of establishing plot that really made me care about her by the time her persona awakening came around.

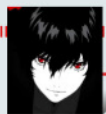
Something especially interesting about *The Phantom X*, however, are the Phantom Idols: characters that aren't canonically Phantom Thieves or persona users, but are manifested as such through the protagonist.

It's essentially *The Phantom X*'s way of being able to gacha itself up without having to narratively tie every single banner to the story, and I think it's the perfect way to do it. It certainly helps that the game at least attempts to make sure you're clued up on these people, or give you the opportunity to know them more.

The Phantom Idols are mostly side characters I was already

MASS THIEVERY

All the Phantom Thieves' appearances



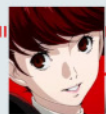
PERSONA 5 THE OG 2017
Didn't make it to PC, just all the consoles instead. This game started it all, with high-school kids battling Shadows.



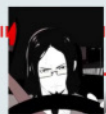
DANCING IN STARLIGHT THE ONE WITH THE MUSIC 2018
Another PC-less release (a total crime). Has some real sick remixes though.



PERSONA Q2: NEW CINEMA LABYRINTH THE SERIES CROSSOVER 2018
Chibi dungeon crawler with *Persona 3* and 4 characters.



PERSONA 5 ROYAL THE OG REDUX 2019
A classic director's cut. More story, bigger cast of characters, and a grappling hook!



PERSONA 5 STRIKERS THE MUSOU 2021
Surprisingly good summer spin-off/ sequel/ *Dynasty Warriors* mix. It became the first P5 PC release.



PERSONA 5 TACTICA THE ONE WITH THE STRATEGY 2023
More chibis, this time enmeshed in a tactical role-playing game (and on PC).



ABOVE: Hmm, now where have I seen this exact shot before?

FAR LEFT: The Subway Slammer: Shibuya's most sinister auramaxxer.





ABOVE: Is it *Persona* without at least one mildly phallic design?

TOP RIGHT: Delivery drivers with menacing vibes appears to be a worldwide phenomenon.



Lufel

So this is Kiuchi's Palace, huh? Looks a lot more like a baseball stadium to me.

ID:60000

encountering out in the world, like exchange student Yaoling Li or even Motoha's best friend Tomoko Noge. Not only is it a relatively easy way to dump new characters into an ever-growing gacha pool, it also allows the game to do something I'm really fond of: turning not-teenagers into persona users.

I've already got a massive weak spot for Kayo Tomiyama – a 44-year-old housewife whose vocab is still chock full of painfully old lingo, remnants of her former life as a gyaru which we get to see in her Phantom

Idol design. It goes the other way, too, like ultra smart ten-year-old Haruna Nishimori. And they're not in the game right now, but future updates should see new recruits like the 75-year-old Chizuko Nagao, who I am unbelievably excited for.

Both Phantom Idols and Phantom Thieves are put to use in classic *Persona* combat. Turn-based, weakness exploitation, and a modified Once More system that has selected characters doing an automatic follow-up attack instead of *Persona 5*'s more manual skill selection. It'll be a familiar system to veterans, and it feels as good here as it does in its more traditional format.

That's because combat is tied to most of *The Phantom X*'s more gachafied systems, of which there are a staggering number. There are a dozen different currencies for all manner of progression. Want to level up characters? Spend your stamina on one fight. Want to upgrade your weapons? That'll be more stamina spent in a different fight. It's a lot of different menus, information and rechargeable currencies to keep track of. Even by gacha standards.

There are also more challenging modes for me to flex my built-up characters: Velvet Trials throw all manner of strong shadows my way, with my performance usually scored based on how quickly I can end the fight and do it with relatively little damage to my own squad.

Not to harp on too much about *Honkai: Star Rail*, but the two feel very much the same in this regard, so if you have any experience in Hoyoverse's turn-based JRPG, you should feel fairly comfortable with its battle mode overload. If you don't,

though (or like me you've been out of those trenches for a hot sec), *The Phantom X* throws an awful lot at you very quickly and it's a touch on the overwhelming side.

The whole thing is really further hindered by the attempt to convert *Persona 5*'s UI – which slaps as much as it does thanks to the original

game's ability to simplify information straight down to a couple of words – into reams of text and information. It's the only time I've felt the stylisation is actively working against the navigation, and I wish a

better middle ground had been found to retain that feeling while not making it look like an absolute mess.

The sheer density of it does mean that it takes a while to figure out the flow. All of the different modes, quests, and other options are tucked away in menus and it took me a few days just to figure out where everything was and how I should structure each of my play sessions.

Days are still broken up into parts, but I can freely zip between times to complement whatever goal I'm trying

to achieve. If I need to spend my action points, for instance, I can skip to the afternoon to up my social links and work part-time jobs.

Sidequests that require specific times or weather conditions let me freely jump ahead, too, almost removing the need to have that requisite in the first place. It's incredibly convenient, which I ultimately prefer, but I do miss some of the more rigid scheduling I've become accustomed to.

TIME SKIPPING

Once I was able to dig beneath all that gacha BS (I say that endearingly, as someone who is imprisoned by at least one of these monsters at any given time), it ultimately became more of the *Persona* I knew and loved. That's a feeling that has helped to carry me through its weaker moments, just to experience those highs I'm familiar with.

Would I prefer a *Persona 6*, or anything that doesn't involve some gang of Phantom Thieves? Sure, but *The Phantom X* has mixed it up just enough to stave off that weariness I've been feeling for a bit longer.

Swapping out the OG squad for a new cast of strong, well-written characters keeps things feeling fresh. They don't feel underbaked or like they were purely designed to push monetisation, and certainly wouldn't feel below par if they'd been starring in a full-price *Persona* entry instead.

And once all of the *Persona 5* nostalgia bait and questionable first villain subsidies, *The Phantom X* begins folding more of its cast into a far more interesting story. I'm still navigating my way through it, but I've really been appreciating the way it tries to explore themes around apathy and the loss of desire, rather than the 'rotten adults' throughline of *Persona 5*. If you're looking for something new, you're certainly not going to find it in *The Phantom X*. But if you're cool with gacha games and are down to see a different set of Phantom Thieves, this game will carry you through at least a few months of fun. Budget-friendliness depends on you, of course. ■

Phantom Idols and Phantom Thieves are put to use in classic combat

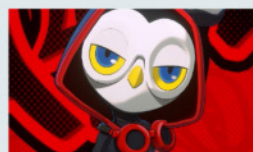
PHANTOM THIEVES 2.0

Meet the new crew



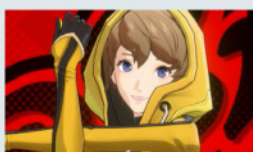
PROTAGONIST
CODENAME: WONDER

Your typical *Persona* protagonist. A little aloof, a little whimsical, a whole lotta mystery. Has a crazy nice house for someone living that close to central Tokyo.



LUFEL
CODENAME: CATTLE

The mandatory *Persona* animal mascot. Has a lot of weird and archaic vocabulary that makes him mildly off-putting. Side note: terrible Phantom Thief name.



MOTOHA ARAI
CODENAME: CLOSER

Chie Satonaka-adjacent. Cheerful and popular at school, but dealing with some pretty heavy childhood baseball-related trauma. The first friend and persona user that Wonder encounters.



SHUN KANO
CODENAME: SOY

An incredibly awkward lad lacking in the social skills department (mood) that makes him appear a wee abrasive. Huge foodie though, and makes a crackin' bowl of ramen.

PC GAMER VERDICT

There's not much new *Persona* to find here, but gachafication doesn't stop the series' strengths from shining.

78

SOULLESS

WUCHANG: FALLEN FEATHERS can't escape Dark Souls' shadow

By Tyler Colp

Wuchang: Fallen Feathers has almost nothing to add to the Soulslike genre. For all of its 40-something hours of monster battles and weirdo NPCs, all it does is poorly imitate the best moments in FromSoftware's list of much better action games. Skimpily outfits, dull combat and an empty world cheapen the entire experience and bury the few things it actually does well.

In *Wuchang*, the people of China aren't turning into werewolves like in *Bloodborne*, they're turning into birds. First they go blind and lose their memories and then they turn into tortured avian creatures with boss health bars. Your character, Wuchang, has it too, but most of her symptoms give her combat techniques.

The only thing she actually suffers from is gradually losing her mind and memory as you play, which forces you to fight a demon version of her to get your stuff back. Otherwise, *Wuchang* seems to be doing fine. So fine that her body remains perfectly doll-like to dress up in sexy clothes that have absolutely nothing to do with the game's gruesome version of China during the Ming dynasty.

It's hard to feel the gravity of the situation as I wade through pools of

blood and listen to the cries of people who have lost their friends and family to a horrifying disease when I'm playing a character designed to be eye candy. Part of what's so

compelling about FromSoft games is the imaginative ways they blend horror and humour in their worlds, like wearing a ridiculous mushroom outfit that gives you immunity to scarlet rot in *Elden Ring*. As

absurd as some of the things in its games are, all of them are rooted in its fiction. *Wuchang's* world doesn't feel as deeply considered.

There's only so many times I can kill the same hunched-over man

DULL BLADE

Wuchang brings one admittedly clever idea to the weighty, punishing combat you expect from a Soulslike. Narrowly dodging enemy swings or landing repeated hits lets you weave

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An action-heavy Soulslike set in a plague-stricken 14th-century China

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Leenzee

PUBLISHER
505 Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9 12900K, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 5090

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2277560/WUCHANG_Fallen_Feathers

in powerful spells and unique attacks without having to worry about draining a mana bar. Every weapon can make use of these special reactions based on how you invest your points in *Wuchang's Path of Exile*-sized skill tree.

Outside of the boss fights, however, *Wuchang's* combat drags. There's only so many times I can kill the same hunched-over man and his crawling skeleton sidekicks before I fall asleep. Most of the encounters are built like speed bumps on the road to the next boss, and even when they do require a little thought, they're tricks stolen right out of FromSoft games.

A few hours into *Wuchang* I was tiptoeing across wooden planks in a poison-filled area that might as well be *Dark Souls'* Blighttown. Soon after, I was sprinting past monsters to track down the necromancer who was endlessly summoning them.

All the incoherence keeps me from latching onto anything in *Wuchang*, especially once I understood everything I did find enjoyable would end and kick me right back out into the monotony of bad FromSoft impersonations.

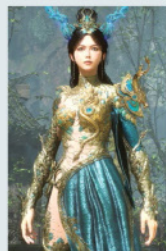
It's disappointing for a game that could've landed somewhere closer to *Black Myth: Wukong*, an action game that dabbles in Soulslike elements but leans on martial arts and Chinese mythology as its main draw. Even FromSoft's own *Nightreign* twists what you'd expect out of its games and injects a little *Fortnite* into what is effectively a boss rush mod. Both games produce something new with the genre that still incorporates familiar parts of it. *Wuchang* is far too derivative for its best moments to shine, leaving it to be buried by the ever-growing pile of Soulslikes. ■

FASHION SOULSLIKE

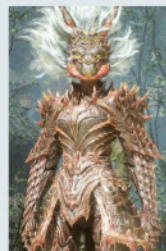
Wuchang's dress-up game is all over the place



DEFAULT PIRATE
The default pirate look is pretty. Pretty tame, that is.



FULL DRAGON
You can go full dragon and don big horns.



CENTIPEDE
Or you can be some kind of centipede monster.

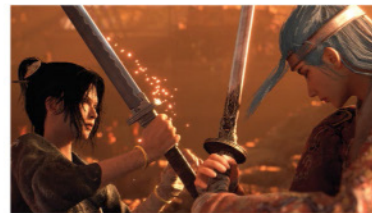
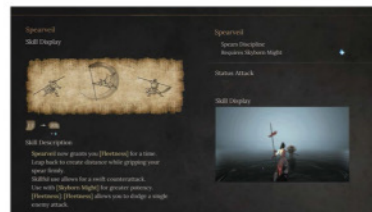


SLASHER VILLAIN
Want to look like a slasher villain? You got it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

With its derivative, incoherent world, *Wuchang: Fallen Feathers* is an imitation of better Soulslikes.

49



FAR LEFT: Some areas have a very striking aesthetic.

LEFT: Every weapon has equippable special attacks.

BELOW: Spells are some of the most fun I had in the game.





FORM AND FUNCTION

Prodding aliens to see what happens in **FORMLESS STAR**

Like *No Man's Sky* if it had been doodled into an exercise book, *Formless Star* is a game about visiting an alien planet and recording all the weird animals that live there. And there are some really fascinatingly strange creatures here: like a sentient die, and a big pane of glass that insists on recklessly dashing everywhere, and an 'animal' that is actually the coolest pixel art mech I've ever seen.

But *Formless Star* isn't a game about photographing these animals from a distance – it's a game where you discover the creatures by sidling up and interacting with them. Every one of the 61 creatures (well, maybe not the last one, which is a special case), rewards your curiosity with a funny factoid, and more importantly with unique functions and animations.

Take the Pickler, which chucks its head into the air and permanently destroys any tile it lands on, or the circular Orrery, which inhales you into a miniature solar system before teleporting you clear across the map. More than the function these interactions perform (which is almost never useful, though amusingly so), it's the quality of the

animation that makes interacting with every single animal worth it. This is gorgeous, fluid pixel art boasting some of the best creature designs you'll find in, well, anything.

Gorgeous pixel art boasting some of the best creatures you'll find

SHIP SHAPE

That really is your only goal: to wander around the planet and interact with everything, with no barriers in the open world that can't be overcome, with a little perseverance. The planet is randomly

generated every time you start (or you return to your ship), though any animals you've met will stay met, thankfully. I'm not sure if you need to return to your ship for the rarer animals to be introduced, but it's a good idea anyway, to refresh the gaff if you find yourself stuck. No matter

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A cosy game about cataloguing weird aliens on an uncharted planet

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
splendidland

PUBLISHER
splendidland

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/FormlessStar

how the patchwork planet has been jumbled together for its latest iteration, you will always have the tools to explore every inch of it.

Bush or tree (or jelly mound) standing in your way? Press the action button and the little hero will whack it down. Confronted by a tile of water, or a whole coastline preventing you from visiting an island? The action button will automatically make a bridge tile, with infinite wood pulled out of your back pocket. Meanwhile, the greater obstacle – getting lost – is solved by teleporting.

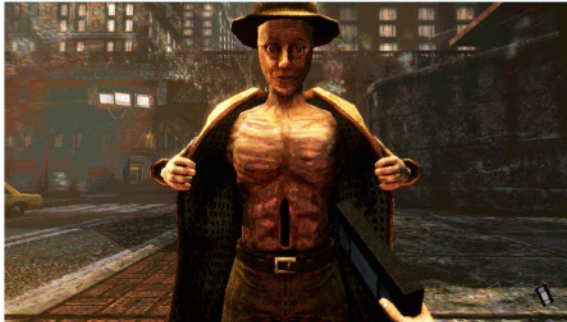
After two hours, I can't deny that weariness was settling in, but the in-game hints helped me discover the last few pesky animals. I'm glad I finished the game, because the final creature put this whole planet into perspective, enriching your achievement with a beautiful message. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

There's no danger, just good vibes and fun aliens in this touching exploration game.

81

BELOW: Not sure I would have agreed to this if I knew what was involved.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Freshly Baked Games

LINK
bit.ly/TheNewFlesh

VIDEODROME

The flesh is willing in **THE NEW FLESH**

It might be a game set at an intersection, but *The New Flesh* ably demonstrates how to keep a small space feeling exciting, even as you trudge round its streets for the third or fourth time.

In this first-person exploration game, you've arrived in a weird parallel city looking for videotapes to cram into a flasher's abdominal cavity. This creepy fella is your first quest-giver, though to be fair the tapes aren't hard to find, as you explore a chunk of an empty city and get teleported to several fantastical locations. It's like someone lopped off a wing of Cosmo D's surreal exploration game *Off-Peak*, then made it a licensed tie-in for the band Red Vox.

So yes, that last bit: this game is sort of a promotional thing, containing a few songs from the band's upcoming album. These songs

trigger as you enter certain locations, and usually accompany ambitious, playable sequences that contort or otherwise transform the environment around you. I'd never heard of the band, and I still know nothing about them other than that their pleasant indie rock music soundtracked these sequences pretty well.

I didn't get the sense that these surreal environments have anything to do with the band, and I'd urge you to give it a go if you want to witness some impressive visual effects and transitions. On the exploration side, once you've filled that fella full of VHS, you're suddenly doing a cat's bidding, though in a city being transformed by falling sand. New locations are in reach, as the game builds towards its spectacular ending. Promo game or not, this is exciting stuff. ■

73

LOSE YOURSELF

Survival at all costs in **ONE'S OWN EXILE**

Games about grim survival usually invite us to make hard choices by killing or betraying other people, but what if the person you have to betray is yourself? That's the question *One's Own Exile* grapples with, as you try to escape a society where difference is feared, and ultimately eliminated.

After your bazaar is ransacked, you decide to flee from tyranny and to the safety of the Northern kingdom. However, to do that you'll need to pass through a heavily guarded checkpoint. Go as you are and the guards will kill you on the spot. But to pass as one of the regular townsfolk, you will need to strip away everything you are.

Sybil, the protagonist, outlines it neatly at the start, saying that she will need to cut her long hair, throw her religious items away, basically destroy

all trace of her culture to pass the checkpoint and survive the witch hunt that is coming for her. And that's not even the hardest part, as she contemplates searing away her tattoos. You have these tasks to perform in the town, and every step is horrifying to watch, as parts of Sybil and her culture are torn away until there is almost nothing left.

I haven't discovered all the endings. I don't know how to discover the other ones but this was a powerful story as I erased Sybil's identity and approached the checkpoint with every finger crossed.

The ending I got for that effort felt inevitable, the climax that had been teased at the start, even if I wanted to tell Sybil that hair can regrow, and icons can be fashioned anew. Survival in the face of horror is nothing to sniff at. ■

BELOW: To blend in, you will need to throw away the icons of your religion.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Updog Software

LINK
bit.ly/OnesExile

72

If this head turns
towards me, I
might actually die



UMBRELLA ENCHANTED

RESIDENT EVIL 3 is a short, severe Valentine's day massacre

Sometimes, before you play a game, you think you have an intro already written. I was going to talk about how hard it is to make slow zombies scary in a post-28 Days Later world. But honestly, that's bullshit: they're dead people who moan and try to bite you. They walk funny. It's an absolute pant-shitter.

And somehow, *Resident Evil 3* manages to elevate that. Perhaps it's the setting, but the opening moments make everything feel so urgent I start sprinting everywhere. And this turns out to be risky, since the zombies keep getting back up. There's a special kind of fear that comes from stumbling into a room you thought was safe, only to run straight into the rotting arms of an enemy you thought was dead. It's honestly amazing that there's any fear left to squeeze out of this particular septic rag. It's also one of those games that makes me really appreciate the unsung heroes of game design, who help me effortlessly navigate the twilight streets of Raccoon City. There are weenies everywhere. If I'm ever unsure where to go I just look up and head towards the Toy Uncle

**It still has
that classic
Resi feel
of having
to backtrack**

(which sounds like prison slang for something unmentionable). The pacing is magnificent, too. It still has that classic *Resi* feel of having to backtrack when you find the tool you need, but it's so seamless done that each step forward feels like a bite-sized chunk of progression. It layers nicely with the next thing you need, whether it's bolt cutters or Jill's lockpick, which, once again, she has forgotten to bring with her.

TYRANT FIGHTER

That's before you even factor in Nemesis – which, candidly, is less of a triumph. It's hard not to compare him with the rest of his lumbering ilk: Mr X felt omnipresent and threatening, like the sound of the male loneliness epidemic trapped in your loft. And Jack Baker was the Candyman of

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
That Difficult Third
Zombie Movie:
The Game (ask
George Romero)

EXPECT TO PAY
£33

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
Capcom

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700,
16 GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/952060/Resident_Evil_3/

dads: he could emerge from anywhere, as if summoned by a pickle jar that needed opening. Nemesis, by comparison, feels like a railroaded, predictable presence. His scenes still have the capacity to thrill, but they feel like a step back, somehow. It's typified by the way he's introduced: immediate and shocking, but lacking some storytelling heft.

Next to Mr X being dropped from the skies via helicopter, it feels cumbersome. It also doesn't help that the character design has lost something: similar to being chased by a charcuterie board reimagining of Droopy the sad cartoon dog. But perhaps this is perfect for the remake. For me, the third entry was always the most disposable of the 'classic' *Resis*: missing the sweep of the second game and the scares of the first. The remake is urgent, brisk, terrifying, and slightly unessential. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Breathless and sometimes brilliant, the third remake remains sadly overshadowed by what came before it.

77

BELOW: A title that keeps reminding me how bad I probably am.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£33.50

DEVELOPER
Mimimi Games

PUBLISHER
THQ Nordic

CONE TOMAHAWK

The intoxicating tactical voodoo of **DESPERADOS III**

This is the second intro I need to rethink. I was going to talk about how it's nice when a game's systems are so sharp it doesn't matter that they're nonsensical. But I spent minutes searching for my daughter after she hid in a bamboo thicket. Apparently, bushes do make you invisible.

Unlike in *Desperados III*, it didn't end with a dagger being thrown at my throat. And the fact remains that the game's system of cones, shrubs, and booby-trapped doctor's bags is ridiculous. It shouldn't work. But it does. And it does such a fine job of teaching you this stuff that I become proud of my stilted semi-competence far too early. I'm feeling good about myself because I managed to do two things at once, then I see a replay map showing what I did and how long it took me. It was like the

unfocused meandering of a snail infected with a parasitic flatworm, albeit with more dead cowboys stashed in bushes. *Desperados III* is so deep and so rewarding that it takes me time to realise how bad I am at it, like the Dunning Kruger effect of game ability (which, ironically, I may have slightly misunderstood).

The interplay between characters is brilliant, and there's something ghoulishly brilliant about leaving waylaid outlaws lying around as bait. It's all so brilliant, in fact, that it makes me sad about the years I wasted avoiding the likes of *Commandos* and *Desperados* because, to my clear detriment, I like big people in games. I know it's an absurd reason to avoid a franchise, and I've learnt my lesson, even if some part of me still wants to zoom in and see what's going on. ■

87

KARAK ADDICT

Mustarding the thong in **TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III**

It almost feels illegal including a *Total War: Warhammer* game in *They're Back*, because the title implies that it ever went away. In my case, that simply isn't true. I've played it for hundreds of hours. But it feels similarly unlawful to exclude it from a list of interesting threequels. So in it goes.

It's so good that I want to stand on an oathstone and lecture you about how every single faction is potentially a game in itself; more, in fact, given the variation between legendary lords. But I need to be honest. I still basically only play as dwarfs. And when I'm not playing as classic dwarfs, I'm playing as their cursed, magic-using brethren instead. This is honestly the best metric I have for how good *Warhammer III* is: I literally can't stop playing the same starting position over and over again,

and it's not even close to being the most entertaining faction in the game. I could just create custom battles or go online, but, for some reason, nothing feels as pure and rewarding as shredding grobi scum with an Organ Gun that I've earned.

I resent the need to go roaming around the world settling grudges as the dwarfs; a race so insular that they view their own rangers with suspicion. And the endgame is still under- and overwhelming at the same time: the scale inevitably shifts and you usually go from having a few armies you know intimately to 20 armies led by people you can't name, in places you don't recognise. But these are minor grumbles about a game that has given me thousands of hours of enjoyment, crammed with factions I'll probably never get around to playing. See above. ■

93

BELOW: The Jabberslythe: the Beastmen's reward for a good campaign.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Creative Assembly

PUBLISHER
Sega

OBSESSION
IS A CURSE

POLICE

STEP INTO THE SHOES OF A BLOOD SPATTER ANALYST IN THIS NEW SURVIVAL HORROR



SHE'S LEAVING[®]

WISHLIST **NOW**
COMING SUMMER **2025**

WWW.BLUEHATSTUDIO.CO.UK

*A trap?
Possibly*

*No. I'm not
playing god*

*Character did this last
their composure*

Charles. No!

You have to turn back!

Charles.

*...insane! There's a
storm coming*

Taser!!

*I care about the why,
not the who*

To slash is to be frantic

*I can build narratives
through blood*

Who's your suspect?

*What if he
gets us?*

*He who controls the light
controls the dark*

*I think you'll
be alright*

Rural Rural

Contact pattern

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

92

GROUP TEST

The latest budget and mid-range graphics cards reviewed.

98

TECH REPORT

How high pricing is pushing PC hardware to a subscription model.

100

TECH TALES

Using Typing of the Dead as a benchmark for PC keyboard performance.

102

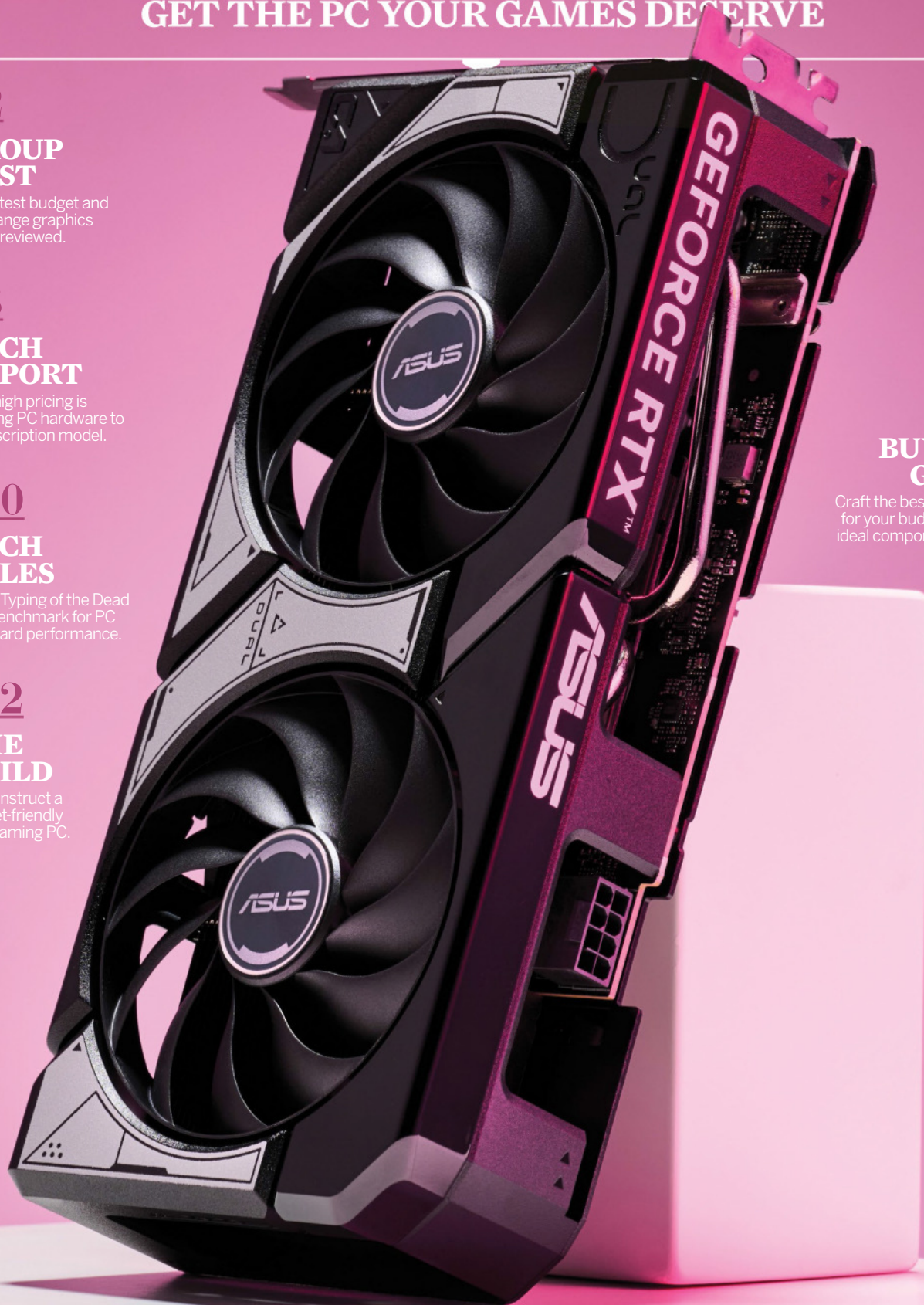
THE BUILD

We construct a budget-friendly Intel gaming PC.

104

BUYER'S GUIDE

Craft the best gaming rig for your budget with our ideal components guide.

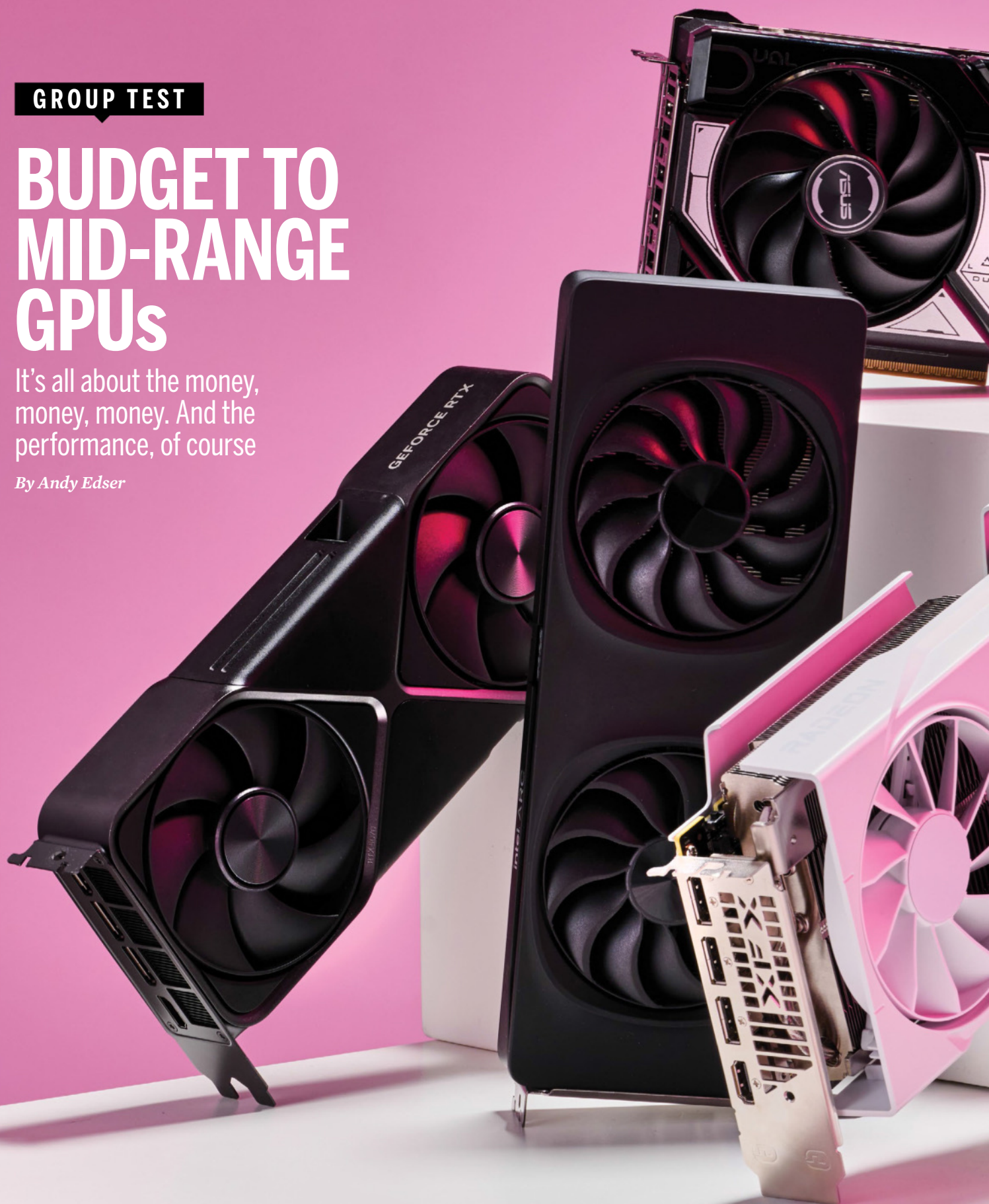


GROUP TEST

BUDGET TO MID-RANGE GPUs

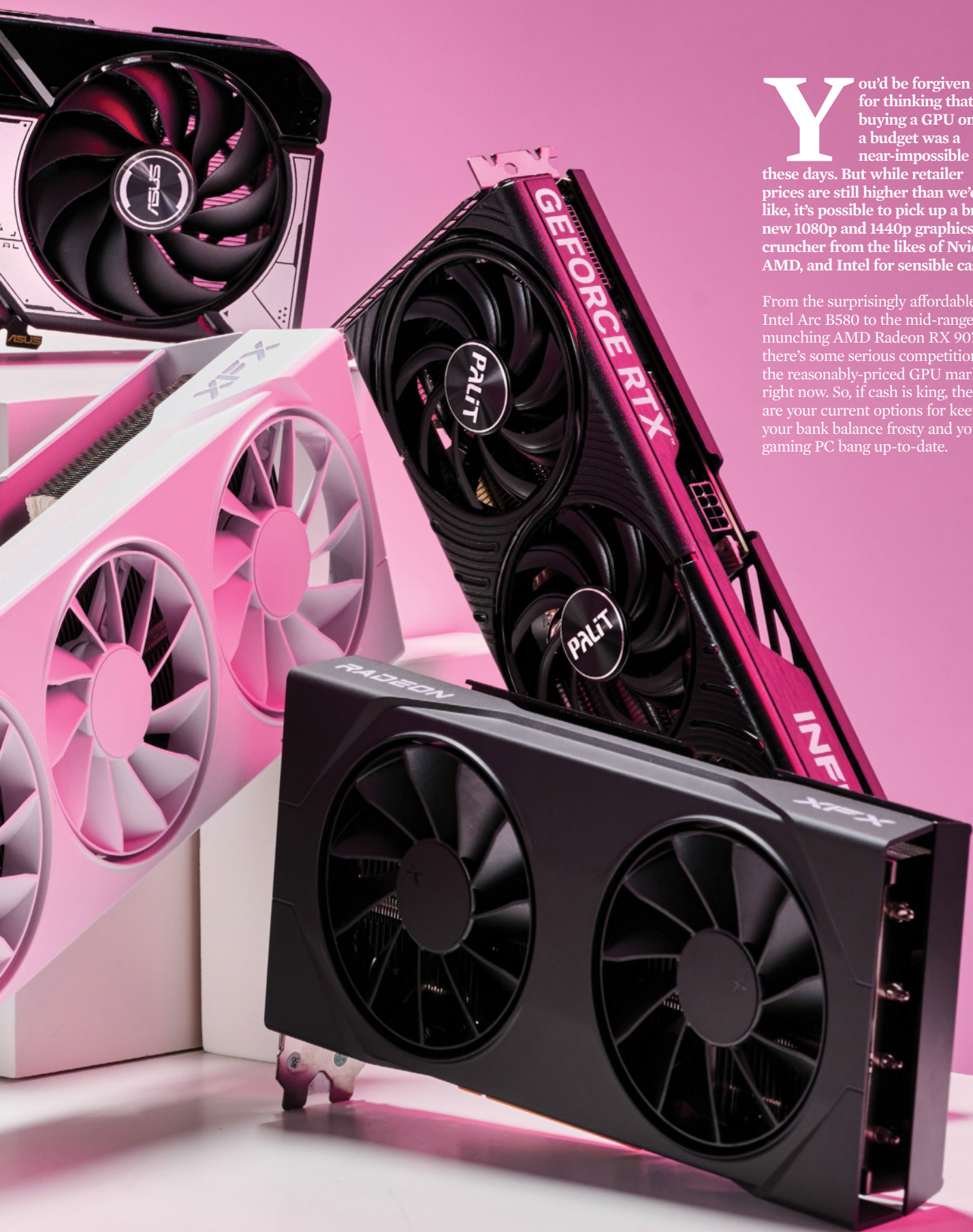
It's all about the money, money, money. And the performance, of course

By Andy Edser



You'd be forgiven for thinking that buying a GPU on a budget was a near-impossible task these days. But while retailer prices are still higher than we'd like, it's possible to pick up a brand new 1080p and 1440p graphics-cruncher from the likes of Nvidia, AMD, and Intel for sensible cash.

From the surprisingly affordable Intel Arc B580 to the mid-range-munching AMD Radeon RX 9070, there's some serious competition in the reasonably-priced GPU market right now. So, if cash is king, these are your current options for keeping your bank balance frosty and your gaming PC bang up-to-date.





1



2



3

GeForce RTX 5060

NVIDIA £269

Budget, but at what cost?

1 Nvidia's budget GPU has, on paper at least, a fair bit going for it. With a £269 MSRP, it slots in neatly into the bottom stack of team green's current lineup as the most affordable, if perhaps not the most exciting option available.

The little Nvidia card uses the GB206 Blackwell variant with 3,840 CUDA cores – a 30% increase over the previous RTX 4060 – and sure enough, the RTX 5060 handily outperforms the previous model. Although not always by as much as you might expect.

It's still capable of a reasonable turn of speed, mind.

The *Metro Exodus Enhanced* benchmark running at 1440p Ultra results in a 63 fps average, 13 frames more than the RTX 4060. That being said, it gets its lunch eaten by the £315 AMD RX 9060 XT across our benchmarking suite, making the Nvidia card difficult to recommend when prices remain even between the two. Its 8GB of VRAM also feels a little tight in 2025 – even if it's just about good enough for 1080p and 1440p gaming as things stand.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Well-priced
- Small and efficient
- Far from exciting

SPECS BOOST CLOCK: 2497MHZ / VRAM: 8 GB GDDR7 / MSRP: £269

GeForce RTX 5060 Ti

NVIDIA £399

A good upgrade proposition

2 Now this is more like it. At £359 for the 8GB model and £399 for the 16GB variant, the RTX 5060 Ti delivers a weighty chunk of performance for your cash. It makes a whole lot of sense as a reasonably-priced upgrade for an ageing rig, providing you can get one for close to MSRP.

It's also a GB206 Blackwell GPU, but this time with significantly more CUDA cores and a higher boost clock than the RTX 5060. Small changes on paper, but when it comes to real-world performance, the RTX 5060 Ti makes for an attractive 1080p and 1440p performer. 75 fps at 1080p in

Black Myth Wukong at High is nothing to be sniffed at, although you'll still want to take advantage of DLSS 4 and Multi Frame Generation to get the most out of it.

Where the card falls down, however, is when you compare it to the significantly cheaper AMD RX 9060 XT once more. While the RTX 5060 Ti edges ahead of it in many benchmarks, it's remarkably close – which should make Nvidia worry at this price point.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- 20% faster than the RTX 4060 Ti
- Excellent overclocking potential
- Trades with cheaper RX 9060 XT

SPECS BOOST CLOCK: 2572MHZ / VRAM: 8 GB/16 GB GDDR7 / MSRP 8 GB: £379 / MSRP 16 GB: £399

COULD PERHAPS BE CALLED THE MOST ANTICIPATED GRAPHICS CARD OF THIS GENERATION



GROUP TEST

RX 9060 XT

AMD £315

A budget barnstormer

3 Here's the card that's been giving Nvidia's budget range a headache. While the RTX 5060 Ti is capable of outpacing the RX 9060 XT overall, it's by such a slim margin the significantly-cheaper AMD card makes for a more attractive penny-pinching buy. It delivers great performance at 1080p and 1440p resolutions, given the minimal outlay.

The RX 9060 XT isn't without its caveats, however. Being an AMD card, you won't be able to take advantage of DLSS 4 and Multi Frame Generation. FSR 4 is AMD's latest equivalent, but support is

limited – and the frame gen is of the 2x variety, although works fairly well overall.

Still, AMD's RDNA4 improvements really have come good with the RX 9060 XT. It doesn't baulk at ray tracing like the RDNA3 cards, and it boosts to 3GHz+ clockspeeds straight out of the box, resulting in respectable performance for the cash. You won't manage much of an overclock, though, as this card's been pushed to its limits straight from the factory.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- RTX 5060 Ti-like performance
- Attractive price
- No Multi Frame Gen

SPECS BOOST CLOCK: 3130MHZ / VRAM: 8 GB/16 GB GDDR6 / MSRP 8 GB: £270 / MSRP 16 GB: £315

GeForce RTX 5070

NVIDIA £539

Not the GPU we were hoping for

4 The RTX 5070 could perhaps be called the most anticipated graphics card of this generation, piggybacking off the popularity of the RTX 4070 before it. The GB205 die at its heart, however, simply doesn't provide the performance boost we were hoping for – beating the previous generation RTX 4070 Super by just 13% overall.

That being said, Multi Frame Generation still works its magic at 1440p, although input latency is an issue when pushed to its limits. Nvidia's lower-stack RTX 50-series cards have a tendency to highlight the downsides of the

tech, and with a relatively unimpressive raw raster performance boost lying underneath it, the RTX 5070 starts to come unstuck.

All of this would be easy to swallow if the RTX 5070 was cheap, but we're only just starting to see cards retail at the £550-600 mark, never mind the £539 MSRP. Put the similarly-priced AMD Radeon RX 9070 alongside it, and the Nvidia card really is relying on MFG to make a name for itself.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Multi Frame Gen works well at 1440p
- Slower than the RX 9070
- Not faster than the RTX 4070 Super

SPECS BOOST CLOCK: 2512MHZ / VRAM: 16 GB GDDR7 / MSRP: £539

COMFORTABLY BEATS
THE RTX 5070 WITH
RASTER PERFORMANCE



GROUP TEST



BENCHMARKS

3DMark TimeSpy Extreme GPU Index score
Tested on AMD Ryzen 7 9800X3D benchmarking rig

Nvidia GeForce RTX 5060

6,379

Nvidia GeForce RTX 5060 Ti

7,261

AMD Radeon RX 9060 XT

7,664

Nvidia GeForce RTX 5070

10,670

AMD Radeon RX 9070

12,647

Intel Arc B580

7,117

Radeon RX 9070

AMD £524

Good performance, if a touch over-priced

5 As mid-range cards go, the RX 9070 makes a good case for itself as the GPU to covet this generation. It's not far off its technically more expensive sibling, the RX 9070 XT, in our benchmarks, and comfortably beats the RTX 5070 with raster performance headroom to spare. Max headroom.

However, like most graphics cards right now, what you end up paying at the checkout is often significantly more than the MSRP suggests.

We've seen the RX 9070 retail reliably around the \$650 mark in the US, although UK buyers have had a better time of

things, with the odd card available for £550 or less.

What this means in practice is, for US buyers at least, the RX 9070 XT is often available for only £40-£60 more – and that's a card that gives the RTX 5070 Ti a run for its money. Pricing this generation has made comparing these GPUs like-for-like something of a nightmare, but if you can pick one up for somewhere near its MSRP, this is the mid-range card I'd plump for as things stand.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- More powerful than the RTX 5070
- Not far behind the RX 9070 XT
- \$100 price premium is disappointing

SPECS BOOST CLOCK: 2520MHZ / VRAM: 16 GB GDDR6 / MSRP: £524

Arc B580

INTEL £250

Your mileage may vary

6 What would a graphics card roundup be without a wildcard, and Intel really has provided with the Arc B580. This 12GB Battlemage GPU is capable of delivering a surprising whack of gaming performance for £250... when it decides to play ball.

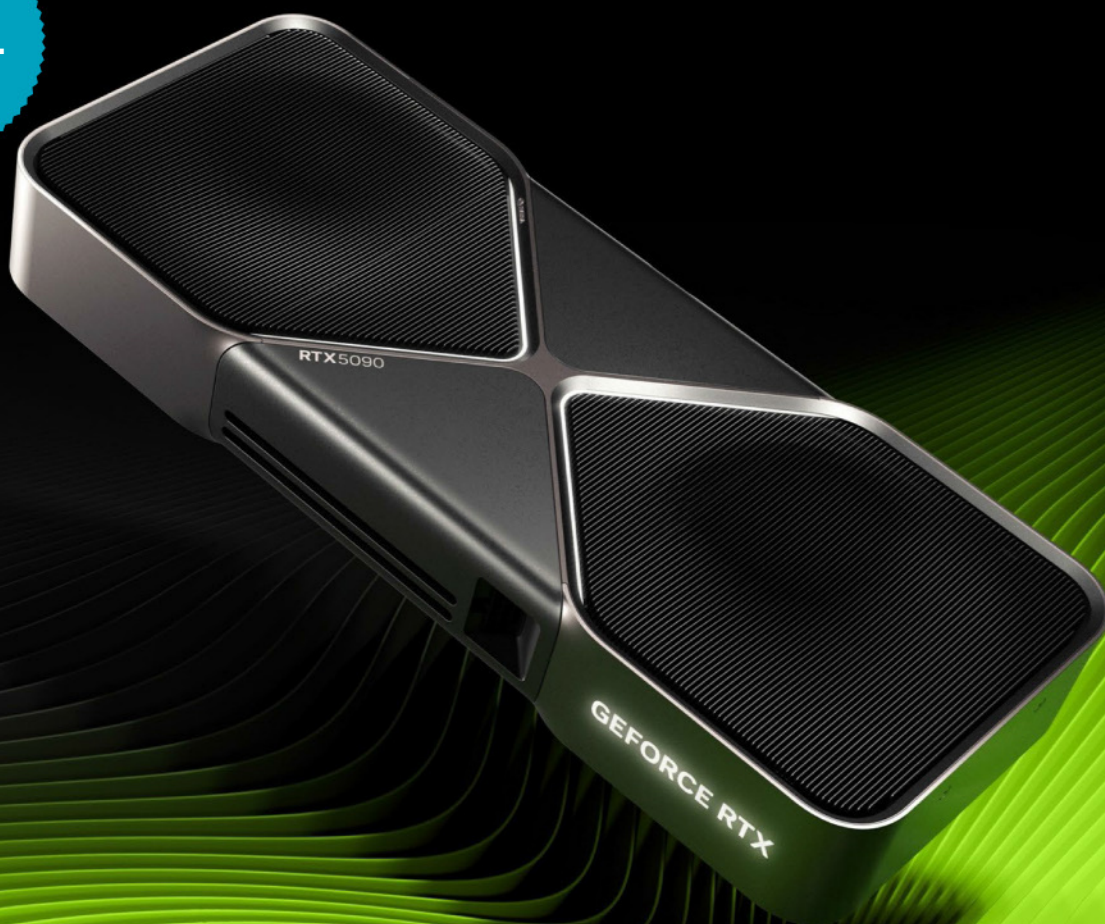
We experienced crashing issues with our test sample in certain games at certain settings, due to some misbehaving drivers. Updates have improved the situation since then, but Intel's graphics driver support has been an Achilles' heel for all of its GPU offerings, and the B580 still has the odd issue in newer games.

That being said, the B580 is capable of giving the RTX 4060 a good thrashing when it's running at full tilt, but it disappears quickly into the shade in real-world gaming performance when compared to the more recent offerings here. Still, you can pick one up for a very low price – but you need to be willing to take the rough with the smooth if you decide to plump for one of these. One for the tech troubleshooting inclined, perhaps.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- About as cheap as modern GPUs get
- Drivers remain a question mark
- Outpaced by recent competition

SPECS BOOST CLOCK: 2670MHZ / VRAM: 12 GB GDDR6 / MSRP: £250



FRAME PASS

High unit pricing is pushing PC hardware towards a subscription model

Early in 2023, rumours began to circulate that Apple had plans to introduce a subscription service for iPhone hardware. Users would pay a monthly fee, and in return they'd get access to, but crucially not ownership of, the latest available iPhone model, whenever it was released.

This was different to buying an iPhone in instalments, or a 'buy now, pay later' credit plan. There was no end point. No final payment, after which the hardware became yours. Like the software on Xbox Game Pass, users would simply have been paying monthly to use it and when the monthly fees stopped, the access dried up.

By late 2024 those – rumoured – plans had been scrapped by Apple, said analysts. They cited regulatory concerns and software considerations. For anyone with a dedicated gaming PC, that was a close call.

Not because Apple's subscription service would have directly affected our access to the RGB tower of teraFLOPS we all keep for our arcane experiments, but because Apple's market position means it sets the trend. If the world's third-biggest company by market cap decides its customers shouldn't own hardware any more, but commit to indefinite monthly payments for it instead, you can bet that everyone from AMD to Zotac will pay attention.

Happening in parallel to those murmurings, Nvidia's last two generations of GPU have shifted dramatically in pricing. At a time when having to buy olive oil and butter in the same weekly food shop feels like a major financial hit, the RTX 3-series and 4-series cards asked us to pay four figures for one component upgrade. That priced out a lot of enthusiasts who might have previously been able to afford top-end models, and forced many of us to revise our upgrade cadence strategy. Buying into the new generation each time, however nice the puddles look on Nvidia's ray-tracing demos, is not a sound financial tactic.

SILVER LININGS

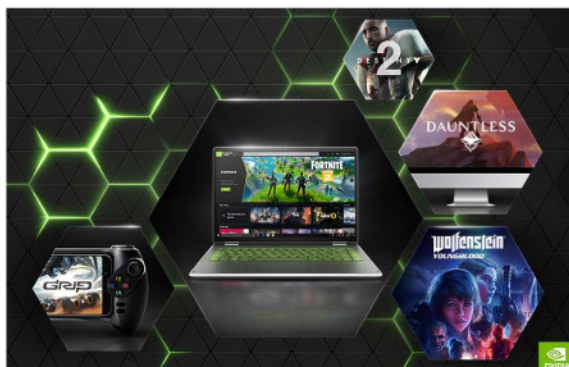
GeForce Now should offer the solution to all of this: you pay a monthly fee for access to an RTX 4080 via the cloud, and take the rendering workload off your local hardware. GeForce Now's 'Ultimate' option provides access to the aforementioned card along with 16 vCPUs, 4K display streaming and up to sessions up to eight hours long for £19.99 per month. Considering the RTX 4080's £1199 launch price, it would take 60 months of GeForce Now Ultimate membership before your fees would eclipse the cost of the card.

However, as impressive as GeForce Now may be, and as great as its progress has been, it's not a completely satisfying alternative to owning high-end hardware and using it to run games locally. There's still that slight, just-about-perceptible



A short hike

One pitfall to consider when entering into any subscription is the potential for price hikes. Netflix and Game Pass both used this strategy to great effect over the years, going to market with an extremely low monthly fee to drive acquisitions and then slowly turning the screw. Inaction is part of human nature – how many of the users who signed up to Game Pass when it cost £1 per month are still subscribed and paying ten times that much? Still, you could always just cancel it, and lose access to your entire game library. Easy peasy.



FAR LEFT: Nvidia's cloud-based GeForce Now offers a non-predatory alternative to hardware ownership.

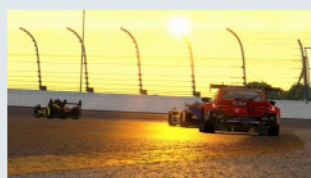
LEFT: NZXT's foray into gaming hardware subscription has become a cautionary tale.

FEE AND EASY *Four firsts in the gaming subscription world*



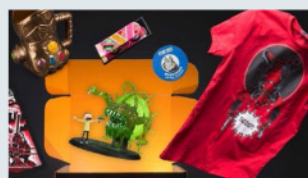
MERIDIAN 59

Released in 1996, this was the first MMORPG that required a monthly subscription to play.



iRACING

A 2008 racing sim that shook up the driving genre with its MMO-style payment model.



LOOTCRATE

'Comic Con in a box' was the concept behind this 2012 gaming merch monthly loot drop.



GAME PASS

How time flies – Microsoft's game library service first launched all the way back in 2017.

feeling of latency, and in a realm where we agonise over specific shadow quality settings and notice even minor frame drops, that matters. But more than that, it's an ideological mismatch with PC gaming.

Since its earliest cultural formation, PC gaming has been about co-opting hardware that was intended for general use and customising it in order to optimise it for specific uses instead. It's taken its cues from car culture, which (partially) explains our love of coloured lighting and liquid coolers. It's about self-expression almost as much as it's about performance. We're tinkerers, and historically we've been more than happy to brave a BIOS screen searching for values that might unlock minute overclocking gains. Taking that all away to a computer farm that you log into and stream your games back from is something different. It's gaming, but it's not PC gaming.

FLEX BOX

But that hasn't stopped companies like NZXT experimenting with subscription models for the use of local hardware. NZXT Flex offers three tiers of gaming PC, priced between \$59 and \$169 per month. You pay the monthly subscription fee in exchange for use of that hardware. It's not streaming via the cloud, it's sitting in your house and doing its thing for you locally, but like Apple's rumoured hardware subscription it's purely an access fee, not instalments towards ownership. You stop paying, the PC goes away.

It's fair to say NZXT experienced some pushback on that particular service. Users cited high monthly fees,

unclear financial terms, slow dispute resolution times and... just about every other aspect of the service, frankly. NZXT released a classic 'addressing your concerns but markedly not apologising' sort of statement, which has done precisely nothing to dislodge the negative sentiment that Flex generated.

Flex is a valuable example of why hardware-as-a-service doesn't work for us in PC gaming: it's a great idea for the manufacturer, who can ship out old inventory and receive predictable, consistent monthly earnings in exchange, but offers no benefit to the consumer. None. Subscription fees are generally priced at a similar level to monthly instalments that would eventually lead to ownership. Service providers would argue the tradeoff for that is the flexibility, since users are free to cancel their subscription at any point and send the hardware back. In the real world, we know that people don't just stop gaming.

IN THE REAL WORLD, WE KNOW THAT PEOPLE DON'T JUST STOP GAMING

Obviously there's a bigger trend at play here that's driven the likes of NZXT to experiment with this business model. The shows we watch, the games we play, and even the software we use to do our jobs, are all offered via a subscription plan, and as much as we all loathe it, it's working. We're paying out. But there are some frontiers where subscription-creep hasn't yet slithered its tendrils and taken hold, and we should all do our best to keep gaming hardware ownership as slippery and impossible to subsume as possible. Otherwise, we're locked into a direct debit from now until forever, to access something that began as a form of self-expression. ■

Phil Iwanik

28 TAPS LATER

Using *Typing of the Dead* as a benchmark for gaming keyboard performance

If you want to find out how good a graphics card is, you fire up the benchmark mode in a nice graphically demanding game. Same goes for a CPU, only you use a more CPU-bound title like *Total War: Warhammer*. You watch the automated sequence, you note down the numbers that the benchmark spits back out at you, and you use those numbers to rank one component against another.

But when you want to find out how good a peripheral is, *Night City* can't help you and the efficacy of that *Hitman: World of Assassination* benchmark with the stately home getting shot to bits is limited at best. It's not that you're going on vibes, exactly, since there are still reasonably empirical aspects like tech specs to compare alongside your subjective experience of the comfort and performance. But in comparison to benching a GPU, it can be frustratingly nebulous to appraise something like a gaming keyboard.

Which is how I came to regularly commune with the quarter-century-old Sega arcade oddity, *Typing of the Dead*. First released into Japanese arcades in 1999, it was a spin-off from the hugely popular *House of the Dead* lightgun game. Only instead of a lightgun to shoot the zombies with, this time you had a keyboard.

The titular dead turned up onscreen with a word or phrase overlaid. You typed the word, bullet sounds rang out, and the reanimated corpse fell to the ground as if defeated by your sheer typing accuracy. A year later in 2000, the PC and console releases followed.

At a time when PC players routinely saw mangled, barely playable ports of arcade and console titles, here was a game whose entire existence seemed to be a sarcastic joke about that situation. No lightgun? No problem. Just type random words that appear on the screen, that's as good as shooting them!

And yet, it works brilliantly. Something about the absurdity of the situation, the life-and-death stakes of frantically typing 'How's your bra?' or 'Deciduous trees' while a moaning, pallid cadaver lurches towards the screen is just too much to resist.

QWERTY AND THRIVING

Obviously, though, it's not just the sheer enjoyment of a 25-year-old typing game that drew me in. Here is a title that offers a rare chance to quantify, with statistics and measurable gaming performance, the merits of a particular keyboard. That's a game changer.

Clearly it's not just me who feels this way about the minutiae of different mechanical switches and backplate materials. The enthusiast keyboard market is reaching ever-more granular levels of customisation, to the extent that models like Corsair's *Makr 75* are

basically just PCBs and empty chassis with vast switch options and modding potential. You could just pick the ones that sound nice, or feel good when you push down on them when the pressure's off and there isn't a zombie about to tear your epidermis off and munch it like a wet burrito. Or you could use science.

I opted for science. It's become an odd and comforting routine for me now to load up *Typing of the Dead Overkill* on Steam whenever I'm trying out a new board. That's the 2014 re-release, with tons of DLC, so I'm very unlikely to run out of words anytime soon.

The thing is, you really do get a quick and accurate indication about how well you're going to be able to play and work with a particular keyboard just from one level of *TotD*. It's not just the switches. It's the amount of actuation each keypress requires, the lateral movement (how much the key wiggles around, basically) and how steeply they're stacked in relation to each other. Personally I'm often tripped up by boards that exaggerate the height differences between the

THE LIFE-AND-DEATH STAKES OF FRANTICALLY TYPING 'HOW'S YOUR BRA?'



PHIL IWANUK
Wizened old freelancer Phil is currently working on a modding project that lets him test monitor refresh rates in *Dance Dance Revolution*. The neighbours are not happy.

SCHOOL'S IN *The Mount Rushmore of edutainment games*



WHERE IN THE WORLD IS CARMEN SANDIEGO?

A sneaky 1985 point-and-click that got us learning geography by accident. For shame, Carmen.



THE OREGON TRAIL

Pictured here in its modern form, this timeless dysentery sim has been teaching us that frontier life was hard for decades.



DEMOCRACY

Straight-faced strategy series less interested in you having fun than understanding the accountability of legislatures.



THE MAGIC SCHOOL BUS

That's more like it. A dangerously potent injection of primary colours and cheeriness, under the guise of learning.

0,200



QWERTY and ASDF rows, and there's no clearer indication of that than seeing the Venetian undead pull apart and eat a civilian you have failed to save.

THE MISSING LINK

What's especially satisfying about this routine I've adopted is that it represents the final frontier of quantifiable peripheral testing. Mice are relatively simple to evaluate: you work through the tech specs, feel it out for comfort and then play a bunch of aim trainer games. Headsets give you specifics like perceptible distortion recorded mic audio to complement the spec sheet items with. But until now, keyboards simply either felt good or bad when you used them.

There are plenty of other typing tests out there, obviously. Google 'typing speed test' and you'll find dozens of very similar browser-based games which give you stat readouts at the end just like *TotD* does. But to this day, nobody's committed to gamifying typing like Sega did in 1999, and for that feat of absurdity, in return, I'm committing to making it my evergreen benchmarking tool. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: Type 'quintessence of dust' or it's curtains. You always knew it would come to this.

BELOW: Mechanical switches aren't easy to evaluate empirically. Not without Sega's help.



The enthusiast keyboard market is getting enthusiast-er. Time to quantify them.

THE BUILD

The Entry-Level Menagerie

By Zak Storey



TOTAL COST £1,109

1

GRAPHICS CARD



Nitro OC Arc B570 10 GB

Acer **£200**

Budget graphics cards are kinda rare these days. Long gone are those hallowed years of sub-£200 cards delivering exceptional value and outstanding performance for the price, as both AMD's and Nvidia's entry-level offerings have slowly crept up. Enter Intel.

This sleek little Acer number delivered on average 53.8fps at 1080p. That's plenty for an entry-level system, and with 10GB of VRAM it should keep you covered for the next few years of game development too. Chuck in a bit of upscaling as well, and it slaps.

2

PROCESSOR



Core Ultra 5 245K

Intel **£240**

Although the Core Ultra series has been pretty divisive, the Ultra 5 delivers some outstanding efficiency.

3

MOTHERBOARD



Prime B860M-A WiFi

Asus **£172**

Asus has made this sweet thing, complete with PCIe 5.0 support, WiFi 6E, 2.5Gb Ethernet and a slick design.

4

MEMORY



Fury Beast DDR5-6000 16 GB

Kingston **£60**

Cheap, cheerful and quick enough for everything we need to do with this rig.

5

SSD



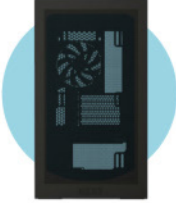
P310 1TB

Crucial **£67**

Although the P310 isn't the fastest SSD out there, it has good sequential performance and decent temps, too.

6

CASE



H3 Flow

NZXT **£59**

As small as an ITX chassis, but with support for 280mm AIOs, full-size PSUs, the H3 Flow is an all-rounder and affordable.

7

POWER SUPPLY



C850

NZXT **£129**

The C850 gives us a ton of room to upgrade in the future and comes with 12VHPWR support.

8

COOLER



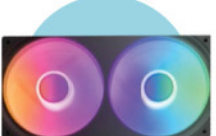
Kraken Plus 280

NZXT **£143**

A whole 280mm of juicy, thick all-in-one cooler, with a display baked into the CPU block as well? Count us in.

9

FANS



F240 RGB Core

NZXT **£39**

We had to stick RGB in here. The standard H3 Flow doesn't come with fans, so we've grabbed one of NZXT's F240s.

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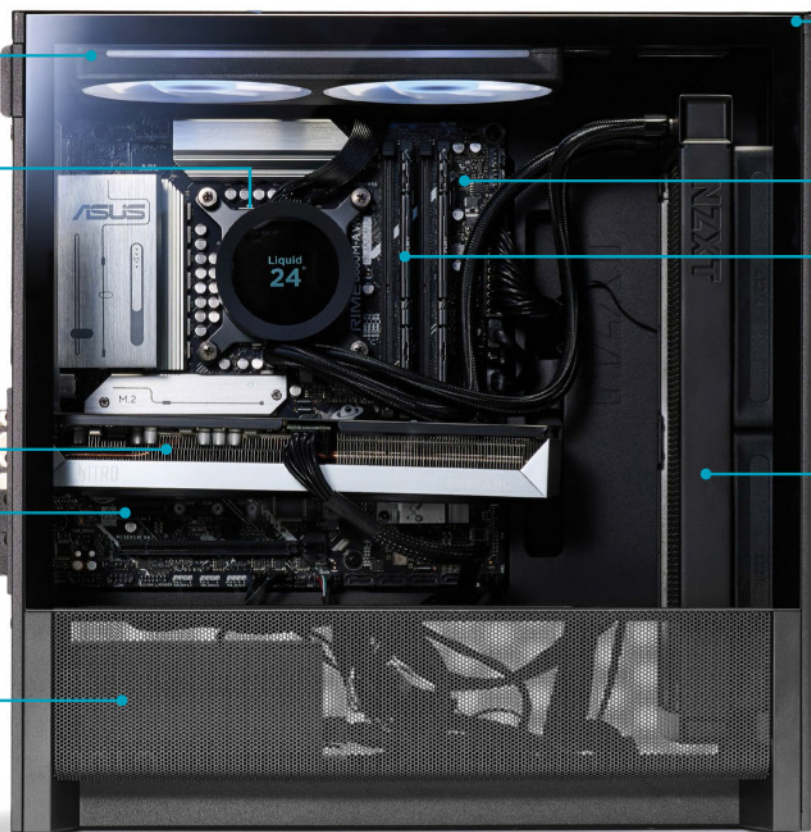
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9



PC GAMER 103

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

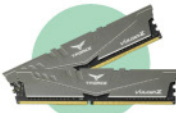
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,055

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £102 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £130 Intel's budget chip is still fantastic value and a solid all-rounder.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 9060 XT 8 GB AMD £300 AMD delivers what we need for a 1080p gaming PC at a solid price, at least until even more budget GPU competition arrives.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £36 8 GB of RAM is simply not enough these days, but 16 GB of speedy DDR4 is much more like it.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 750W Be Quiet! £95 This 750W power supply gives you a decent dose of headroom for some future upgrades, from a trusted manufacturer.
SSD		SN7100 1 TB Western Digital £75 Superb 4K read performance for a reasonable price makes this a great drive for any gaming PC, never mind a budget one.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Mobiuz EX240 BenQ £150 This BenQ is proof you can buy a genuinely excellent 24in 1080p gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: a hot-swappable USB mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		G305 Lightspeed Logitech £30 Even on a budget you can still grab a fantastic, ultra-rapid wireless squeaker like this one here.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £40 Corsair's budget wired cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.
MOUSE PAD		MM100 Corsair £10 A simple black rectangle that can make a world of difference over no-name models, and it's almost as cheap, too.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,679

MOTHERBOARD		TUF Gaming B650-E Asus £176 A reliable motherboard with plenty of frills, including Wi-Fi 6E, 2.5Gb Ethernet, PCIe 5.0 for the SSD and USB-C on the back.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 7700X AMD £270 For the longevity offered by the AM5 socket, we're going for AMD's excellent eight-core Ryzen 7.
GRAPHICS CARD		RTX 5060 Ti Nvidia £450 Nvidia's RTX 50-series cards have been hard to find for good prices, but the 16 GB model is widely available, punchy, and affordable.
COOLER		Peerless Assassin 120 SE Thermaltake £35 It's a big beast, but it brings cooling performance to the table that's undeniably impressive.
MEMORY		Viper Venom DDR5-5600 16 GB Patriot £59 It might not have fancy RGB lighting, but this Patriot RAM certainly has the speed you need for less.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 750W Be Quiet! £104 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with PCIe 5.0 connectivity. At 750W, there's room for a GPU upgrade too.
SSD		NM790 2TB Lexar £110 The Lexar proves you can, sometimes, have it all: blazing speeds, cool operation, large capacity and a great price.
CASE		H7 NZXT £100 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		PXC277 Advanced Pixio £200 The price of this Pixio, considering the 1440p resolution and 165 Hz refresh rate, is quite something.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £45 You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V2 X Hyperspeed Razer £50 The regular V2 is great if you can find one, but this version delivers impeccable gaming performance for less.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £60 We're still not over the awesome audio quality and excellent comfort of the HyperX Cloud Alpha.
MOUSE PAD		G440 Logitech £20 This low-friction hard-top mouse pad with minimal branding offers the smoothest of glides for a reasonable price.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£5,949

MOTHERBOARD		MAG X870E Tomahawk MSI £300 With support for four M.2 drives, huge amounts of DDR5, Wi-Fi 7 and more, this mega mobo is specced to the hilt.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 9 9950X3D AMD £450 The Ryzen 9950X3D has more cores, but it's currently nearly double the price. For gaming? This chip makes much more sense.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 5090 Nvidia £2,200 The RTX 5090 price is ludicrous, but this is a money-no-object build and it's still the fastest GPU you can buy.
COOLER		Galahad II Trinity 360 Lian Li £125 Lian Li's Galahad is all about pure liquid cooling performance and it delivers this flawlessly.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB) G.Skill £115 You could always go for 64 GB if you really want to show off, but 32 GB of speedy DDR5 is still a sweet spot.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1300 Seasonic £520 The RTX 5090 is a thirsty beast, so you'd better give it a serious power supply – and this one's similarly monstrous.
BOOT DRIVE		NM790 4 TB Lexar £210 With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.
MOUSE PAD		Firefly V2 Pro Razer £100 Do you need an RGB mouse mat? If it makes you feel any better it's excellent for flick shots.
CASE		5000D Corsair £139 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM Asus £1,200 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		ROG Strix Scope II 96 Wireless Asus £170 We're keyboard snobs, and we can say with confidence that this full-sized Asus board is about as good as it gets.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V3 Pro Razer £100 This is the best gaming mouse in our opinion, made better by an incredibly lightweight frame.
HEADSET		Maxwell Audeze £320 Planar magnetic drivers make this headset pure heaven for audio fans. And everyone else, to be honest.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“I will embrace Suave Mike and become The Most Cancelled Man”

Learning the art of spycraft in **ALPHA PROTOCOL**

My name is Agent Michael Thorton, and every dialogue is a minefield: two thirds of the options will turn me into The Most Cancelled Man Who Ever Lived. The *Mass Effect*-y archetypes I'm provided with correspond to the spy guy holy trinity: Borne (Professional), Bond (Suave), and Bauer (Aggressive).

Aggressive Mike is a Renegade psycho, greeting an information broker by slamming his face into a bar. Suave Mike is a pervert. I want to strap him to the Clockwork Orange chair just to make him watch corporate anti-harassment training videos. Professional Mike? Nice guy. A little slow. I like the cut of his jib.

And by god are this Unreal Engine 3 potato man and all his deep state pals rubbing off on me? I was

TED LITCHFIELD



THIS MONTH
Saved the free world by crouch walking through Saudi Arabia.

ALSO PLAYED
System Shock 2: 25th Anniversary Remake

worried mission control stalwart Mina Tang's consummate professionalism would wear thin, but her competence belies a wry charm.

Seeing her and Professional Mike open up to each other has this really endearing quality, like watching two mathletes fall in love for the first time. Terrorist mastermind Ali Shaheed has also proven a surprise favourite – he's actually pretty swell once you get to know him.

This game is so janky, but it's charming the pants off me. Very of its era with a plastic sheen of Xbox

TOP: Absolutely nothing usual to see here.

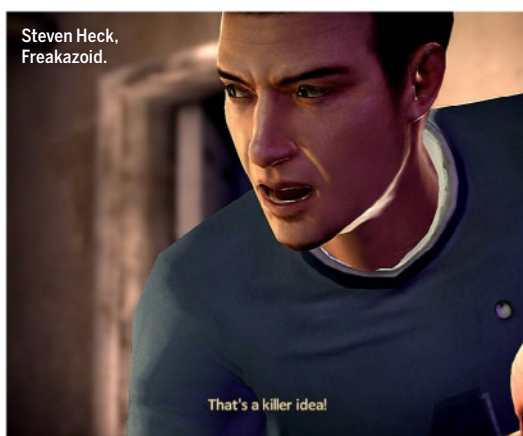
360 over everything and controls that will thrash against you if you try to use a keyboard and mouse instead of a gamepad – shout out to the kind of fun lockpicking minigame, and the awful hacking.

In other ways, *Alpha Protocol* harkens back even further in time: a skill system with a dozen options but only two worth a damn (stealth and pistols) – this is an action RPG in the crusty tradition of yore, and after ten years of Sony first party action RPGs with all the character sanded off, I crave lopsided, horribly unbalanced, but unforgettable games like *Alpha Protocol*.

THIS GAME IS SO JANKY, BUT IT'S CHARMING THE PANTS OFF ME



Steven Heck, Freakazoid.



EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION

Alpha Protocol's already proving to have a web of choices, potential main character deaths, and ending permutations that is surely one of Obsidian's most complex to date, up there with *Fallout: New Vegas* and *Pillars of Eternity 2: Deadfire*. Each major or minor character, including the antagonists, have *Knights of the Old Republic 2*-style influence meters, and Obsidian beat BioWare's *Dragon Age 2* by a year in offering surprise benefits for getting on people's bad sides.

I'm starting to come out of my shell more with deploying psycho Aggressive Mike and Suave Mike, the pervert. A major information broker in Taipei is a manic, self-aggrandising bro – played by Nolan North in his peak 'Nolan North, everywhere' era – who yearns for a fellow freak to swap spy stories with. Suave Mike, you're up.

To get in with good Taipei underground freakazoid Steven Heck, I will embrace Suave Mike and become The Most Cancelled Man Who Ever Lived, at least for a time – donning the mask without becoming it. I just hope my good boy-loving spy girlfriend Mina Tang doesn't find out. ■



“Empowerment out of vulnerability”

Playing **STEALTH GAMES** is frustrating but compelling

▶ IAN EVENDEN



THIS MONTH
Lurked in the darkness, hoping not to be noticed.

ALSO PLAYED
Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines

Stealth games are something I've always admired, ever since I sat and watched a friend playing *Metal Gear Solid* on his PlayStation, but have usually been unable to participate in.

There's something about them that just rubs me up the wrong way. I'm not sure if it's the insta-fail nature of many of them, where a single moment of exposure leads to an army coming down on your fragile protagonist, or if it's the passive nature of hiding when you've invariably got an arsenal you could be using. I would much rather be an active participant in other people's doom. I am not a subtle gamer.

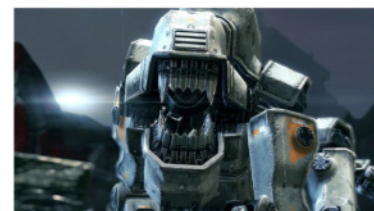
There have been moments, however, when I've managed to pull off stealth. The first *Far Cry*, which asks you to hide in thigh-length undergrowth while wearing a red Hawaiian shirt, is perhaps the earliest: crouched down and holding a machine gun while enemy goons came ever closer, I felt the sense of empowerment out of vulnerability that a good stealth game can provide. “I'm doing it, I'm doing it,” I

remember thinking. Then I stood up and gunned them down.

The important thing in a stealth game is that the enemies are appropriately dumb. *Indiana Jones and the Great Circle* gets this right – its Nazis are half blind, good at looking the other way, slow to react and easily distracted. Gina, though, is invisible to them, and it would be great if Indy could just send her on errands alone, such is her ability to walk in the open without being seen.

Wolfenstein: The New Order, on the surface the antithesis of a stealth game, actually has a surprising capacity for sneakiness. The open maps give you the chance to slip around back streets before plunging a knife into a guard's neck, but also gives you the tools to defend yourself when things inevitably go loud. Nothing gives you more confidence while slinking through the shadows than the knowledge that you have an automatic shotgun in your pocket.

As games continue to blend action sequences with slower, quieter sections, it's hard to avoid stealth. You don't have to be good at it, but you do have to understand the rules. Despite this, I am still unable to finish the first section of *Metal Gear Solid*. ■



“Taking on Fulghor was child’s play – the centaur didn’t stand a chance”

I learnt how to become a team player in **ELDEN RING NIGHTREIGN**

There’s no proximity chat, no voice lines. Just three strangers dropped into a smallish version of Limgrave’s map with by the bosses that caused you pain in *Elden Ring* and *Shadow of the Erdtree*, with a couple of guest appearances from *Dark Souls III*. If that sounds chaotic, that’s because it is.

Playing with randoms in *Nightreign* is a bit of a coin flip – you either get someone who’d rather run across the whole map to pick up a talisman than stick with the rest of the group, or the most coordinated and talented monsters that have ever graced the Lands Between.

The latter instance is what dreams are made of. The other day I matched with two Soulsborne veterans who guided me across *Nightreign*’s maps over both days killing every single boss in our path, including all but one of the legends hiding in the Rotted Woods. By the end of the second day, I was level 14 with weapons like Bastard’s Stars, Hand of Malenia and the Black Knife at my disposal. Taking on Fulghor was child’s play

▶ **ELIE GOULD**



THIS MONTH
I decided to ‘Git Gud’.

ALSO PLAYED
FBC: Firebreak,
Mio: Memories in Orbit

at that point – the poor centaur didn’t stand a chance. Unfortunately, not all runs are made equal. Sometimes when everyone has a plan you need to learn how to compromise without the help of talking it out, only by using the humble ping button.

OFFER AN ACCORD

Using the ping function on the map has not only become second nature to me but it’s almost like a new language. Together with two other strangers, you can figure out your best path through Limgrave by quickly pinging landmarks, changing

your pick to be closer, or confirming a teammate’s choice by pinging their chosen location.

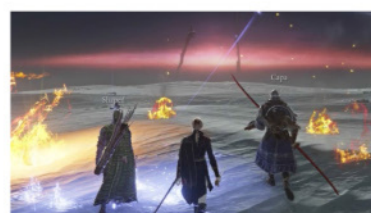
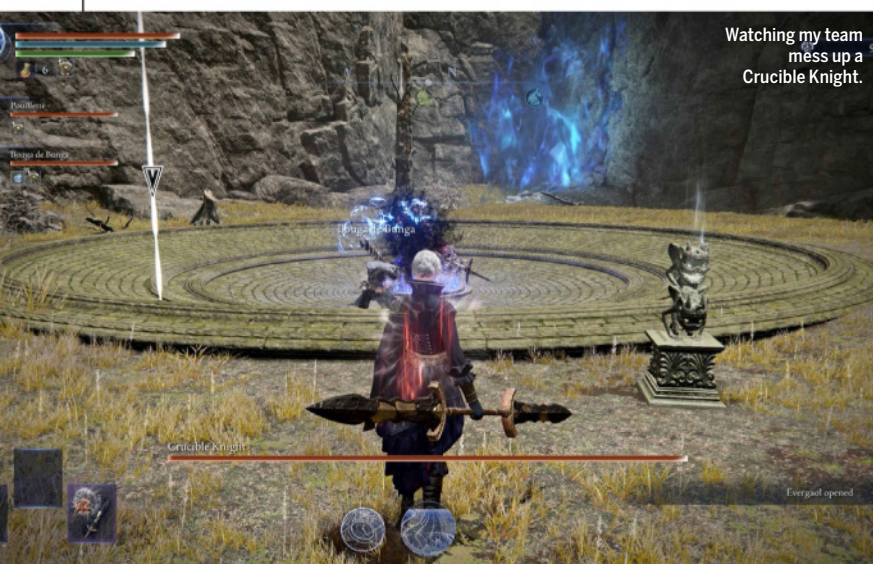
In one instance I was teamed with a couple of other players who all had different ideas. The first day was pretty horrid as everyone kept going off on their own, but after getting our asses handed to us we all took a different approach.

Without any words being shared between us we took turns pinging locations around the map that we wanted to visit, making sure each place was close to the last.

Starting the second day at only level 6 we went on an absolute rampage across all the army encampments, derelict monasteries, individual bosses, and defeated the Bell Bearing Hunter who lay under the fortress at the centre of the map.

It’s refreshing to see how polite strangers can be in *Nightreign*, and how well teammates can work together, pointing out useful items, swapping weapons so that everyone has the best armament, and risking life and limb to revive one another. The camaraderie makes the pill of difficult and buffed bosses easier to swallow, without a doubt. ■

THE FIRST DAY WAS PRETTY HORRID AS EVERYONE KEPT GOING OFF ON THEIR OWN



LEFT: My team and I aura farming before the boss battle.

BELOW: Looking at the scary woods where we’ll have to go next.





'Crazy Taxi' but make it Deliveroo: the most dystopian Yakuza minigame.

“Teaches the value of drinking cup sake with middle-aged men”

Floral shirts and fond farewells in **LIKE A DRAGON: INFINITE WEALTH**

A recent study from the Survey Center on American Life reported that 15% of US men said they didn't have close friends in 2021, compared with 3% in 1990. In the same period, the number of men with 10 or more close friends decreased from 33% to 13%. It's become known as a 'friendship recession' – the sad, once-removed cousin of the male loneliness epidemic. And, without wishing to sound flippant, I think I have the solution. Play *Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth*, a game that teaches the value of drinking cup sake with middle-aged men who really want you to be happy.

There's something inspiring about *Infinite Wealth's* celebration of sincerity. The cast skews older than in most games, and it's refreshing to see a group of post-40 guys supporting each other. Kasuga and his crew are like a wholesome mirror to the dad at school gates who criticises your film taste/career

MATT ELLIOTT



THIS MONTH
Contemplated growing old with a yakuza legend.

ALSO PLAYED
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion Remastered

choice/silicone sealant technique. It's mostly down to new series mainstay, Ichiban. He's essentially a labrador with a baseball bat. It's impossible to think of a character who's beaten more men unconscious yet still retains the sense he's a force for good.

FEELING KOI

For the most part, it's a treat seeing him interact so closely with his forerunner, Kiryu, but it can be challenging. There's a sense of inevitable closure. Narrative spoilers

SHOWS US A SIDE OF THE DRAGON OF DOJIMA THAT WE RARELY GET TO SEE

aside, it feels like we're reaching the end of Kiryu's story. I wasn't into it at first: it felt like a mere novelty having Kiryu as part of Kasuga's crew. The *Yakuza* equivalent of AI Darth Vader in *Fortnite*. After a while, however, I realise it's not that at all. There's depth and purpose here, and Ichi's disarming effusiveness shows us a side of the Dragon of Dojima that we rarely get to see.

This alone is enough to make me love it. But once you throw in new characters and bring back established heroes from the first *Like A Dragon*, it starts to feel absurdly rich. Also, quite dangerously for a giant RPG, it's a game that I'm happy not to play. By which I mean that sauntering around Honolulu and playing darts is as distracting as the main story.

The location isn't quite as compelling as the grimy backstreets of Yokohama, but this, too, is the unique beauty of the series: the only game franchise where the fans clamour to go back to old locations, not new ones. But since I'm already feeling nostalgic about time spent in a pretend place with pretend people. ■

WARHAMMER 40,000: ROGUE TRADER

Now with fewer bugs, unless you count genestealers. *By Jody Macgregor*

Playing Owlcat's CRPGs at launch is a mug's game. It's not just that they're buggy, though that's definitely part of the problem. There's also the wonky balance, inevitably addressed across several months' worth of post-launch patches. Then there's the DLC carefully threaded into the game rather than bolted onto the end where you could play it by loading an old save. To experience the two expansions released for *Rogue Trader* so far, you need to start a whole new playthrough.

Or just wait until the game's been out for at least a year, maybe two, before you even bother with it. Like a sensible person. Each DLC adds a new archetype you can choose, a new companion for your voidship's crew, and a string of sidequests involving them. Both are romanceable, and both have dialogue that comments on other quests if you bring them along, making them feel about as central as the existing companions.

In fact, the first feels more significant than several of the ones who were available at launch. The *Void Shadows* DLC adds Kibellah, an assassin from a death cult that lives in the bowels of your city-sized spaceship, and her questline lets you explore more of that ship and meet more of the officers who help run it. There's an entire train line you'd never get to see without the quest that involves hunting through the ship to find a hidden temple.

As you get to know your ship better you get to know Kibellah and her gonzo philosophy of blood and tarot. She's an unstoppable killing machine who gets powered up when standing in blood, with a leap attack that can be chained and then

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE December 7, 2023	DEVELOPER Owlcat
PUBLISHER Owlcat	LINK roguetrader.owlcat.games

the whole chain repeated to blend multiple enemies in a turn. Her archetype, the death cultist, isn't as broken as the officer archetype was at launch, but still makes her a beast. Yes, of course I romanced her.

Owlcat's love of unchallenging filler combat is toned down in *Void Shadows*, with more fights that have interesting objectives like timers to defeat or generators to shut down and bosses who shield themselves so you can't snipe them on turn one. A dogfight with a space station bristling with turrets made for one of the better space battles too.

Post-launch patches that make combat abilities more impactful help. There's none of the 'improves your chance to crit by 0.5% if it's

raining and also a Tuesday' stuff *Rogue Trader* had at launch. Although you still level up so often it gets annoying. I once levelled-up because I took a bath.

INSPECTOR LEX

The *Lex Imperialis* DLC adds an arbitrator, which is what 40K calls its Judge Dredd analogues, named Solomorne. He's got a pet cyber-mastiff sidekick to suggest a soft side, but there's not a lot of layers to him. *Lex Imperialis* feels thinner than *Void Shadows* in a lot of ways – even adding less music to the soundtrack – though what it adds is actually quite decent.

PATCHES THAT MAKE COMBAT ABILITIES MORE IMPACTFUL HELP

The overseer archetype lets you choose a familiar like Solomorne's dog, other options including a swarm of servo-skulls or a psychic raven. I gave Cassia those skulls, which she can use her officer abilities on to spread over multiple characters within range, making officers feel almost as busted as they were at launch.

PIRATE SPACESHIP

Solomorne's storyline gets into gear with a raid on a pirate spaceship called the Heartless, which you get to keep as a side-piece to your frigate. Both Solomorne and the Heartless were initially rewards you had to wait a bit too long to unlock, but patches have made them available earlier if you needed another reminder not to play anything Owlcat makes close to release.

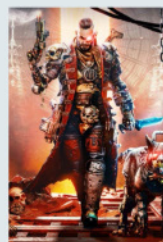
Shooting your way through a pirate ship isn't a bad time, but it does seem a waste of an arbitrator not having his quest begin with a mystery. Something with more crime-scene investigation and less shotgunning generic bad guys.

Still, if you've been holding out on *Rogue Trader* now is a good time to finally bite the bullet.

When you do, grab the *Void Shadows* DLC for sure, but only get the *Lex Imperialis* DLC if you really want a pet dog or skull-swarm of your very own. ■

(WAR)HAMMER TIME

More recent 40K games you might like



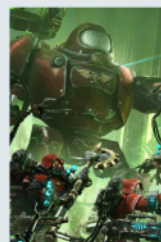
NECROMUNDA: HIRED GUN

A movement shooter with a grappling hook and, just like Solomorne, your own cyber-mastiff companion you can sic on enemies.



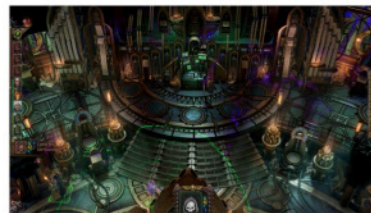
SPEED FRENKS

A multiplayer demolition derby where orks compete in either a point-capture mode or a race to detonate each other's giant stompy mechs.



MECHANICUS

If you like Pasqal, the tech-priest companion from *Rogue Trader*, here's a turn-based tactics game where you get a whole squad of Pasqals.



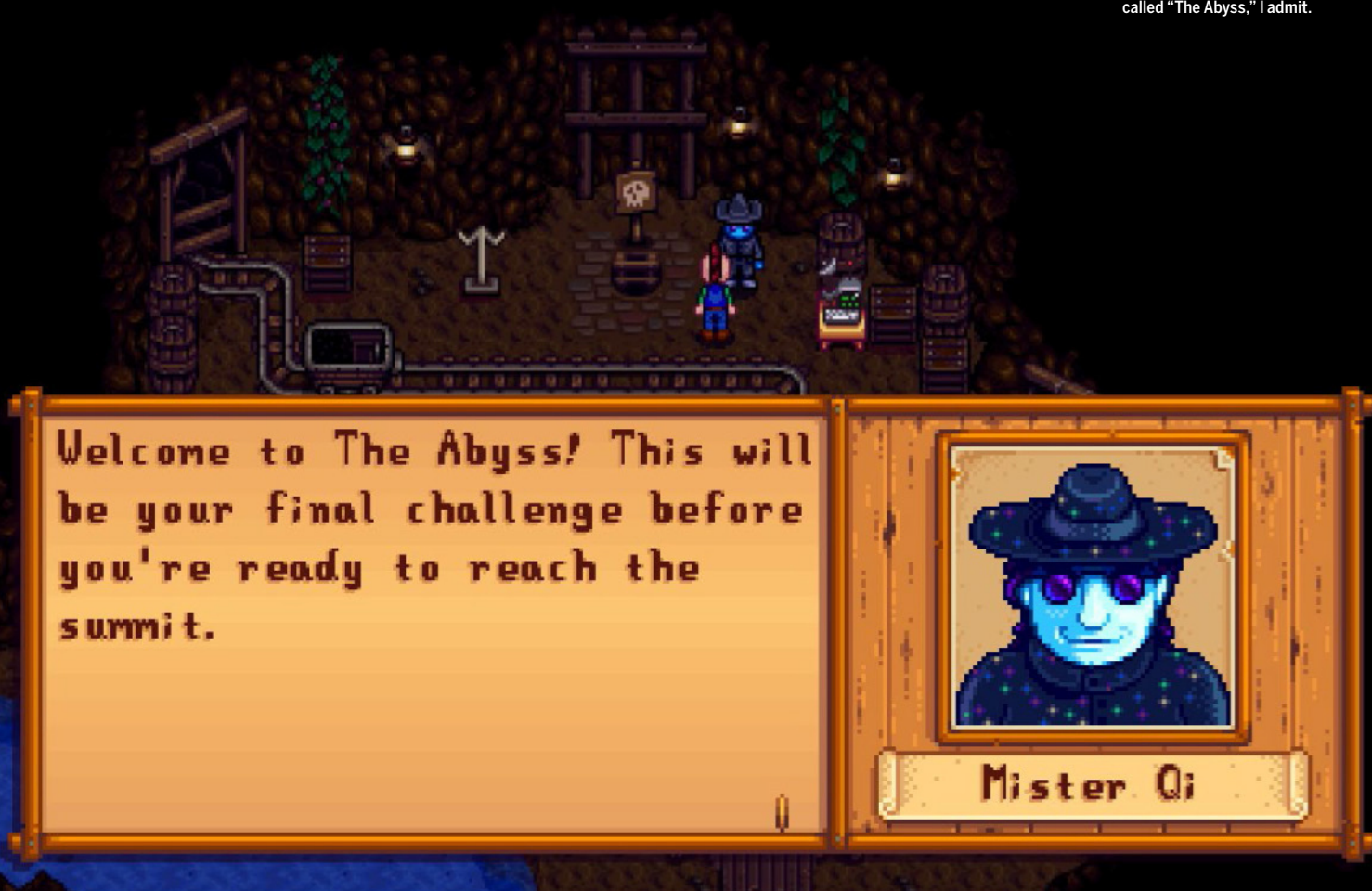
ABOVE: This whole duel scene is basically foreplay.

FAR LEFT: Kibellah is your Imperial Gothic GF.



I am the law. And so is my dog, Princess.

Mister Qi's stupid galaxy carpet hat is a great fit for a place called "The Abyss," I admit.



STARDEW VALLEY – ROGUELIKE

From farming produce to farming mobs. *By Justin Wagner*

I've been playing *Hades* lately, and the worst thing that cosy farming life sim does to you is remind you that most games are not *Hades*. Revisiting my old *Stardew Valley* saves is fun as ever, but where is the upgrade-nabbing, boss-rushing madness my dopamine receptors have come to so ravenously crave? I say *pshaw* to hot dates, egg festivals and sprinkler maintenance. Give me unending violence or give me nothing at all.

OK, I'm mostly kidding. But the combat *Stardew Valley* does have, lean and reverent to NES-era *Zelda* though it may be, is a fun little aside when delving into the mine and doing quests for the Adventurer's Guild. Mod authors Tyler, TheHaboo and Therm thought so too – and in their hunger for more, created one of

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Feb 26, 2016

PUBLISHER
ConcernedApe

DEVELOPER
ConcernedApe

LINK
stardewvalley.net

the more ambitious mods I've seen for the indie darling farming RPG: *Stardew Valley – Roguelike*. Time to put down that watering can and pick up the blade.

REAP WHAT YOU SOW

Rather than add to the existing world, *Stardew Valley – Roguelike* throws you into a vacuum far away from your saves and story progress. Minutes after I spawned into The Abyss – the hell realm where the mod takes place – I was killing slimes, dying to slimes, and starting again to kill more slimes. There's no barn to maintain, few NPCs aside from Mister Qi and Marlon, and no progress to be made



TWO'S COMPANY

Bring a character from *Stardew* into this



MARNIE

She's good with animals and runs her own business. That to me says she's one tough customer.



KROBUS

He's a sweet sewer monster, but surely he's got some dark magic powers that work in combat.



PROFESSOR SNAIL

The guy survived for ages in a cave, and he's an archaeologist so he's probably good with a whip.



THE BEAR

What better companion in a dangerous realm than a bear? Just sit back and watch.



TOP: All those egg festivals have been leading up to this moment.

RIGHT: You might have forgotten how annoying slimes are. The mod will jog your memory.



outside of getting through each floor as quickly as possible.

Once you're in, it's about what you might expect from reading the premise. It borrows a lot from the base game's mine system, but it differs in that you need to kill absolutely everything on a floor to progress. The only exceptions are special floors that pop up every so often, which feature everything from mysterious vendors offering free items in exchange for health to timed Easter egg hunts.

It's all about that sweet, sweet gold, which you can use after each boss to exchange for items and seeds. It's a fun opportunity to gamble on yourself; buying a new dagger or some health-restoring fried eggs will make the floors ahead easier, but seeds will get you more money in the long run. You plant them in the shop, where they'll germinate as you complete floors, but if you die on the way back to the shop your efforts will have been for nothing. When you die in *Stardew Valley - Roguelike*, it's all the way back to the very start, and any perks or items you have picked up will be lost.

PERK UP

Speaking of perks, that's another roguelike staple that fits *Stardew*'s spelunking loop like a glove. After each boss, you'll choose between one of two perks. Some are pretty minor, like a small boost to luck or a splash of extra HP, while others massively boost crit chance or cause certain resources to generate a lot more cash. You won't turn into an auto-firing laser tank like in *Risk of Rain* or anything, but the mod crams in an impressive amount of what makes any given roguelike a good time.

Roguelike's crowning achievement, though, is its boss encounters. From the very first battle, Goobins the Gelatinous Sludge, they're far and away more engaging than most of the chaff you shred through in the whole of *Stardew Valley*. Goobins, for instance, is a king-sized slime who splits off into smaller and smaller slime variants as he loses health – which given that slimes reproduce and jump around erratically, creates a more chaotic battlefield than you might expect. Bosses get harder and harder the deeper you go, and while it's no bullet hell, it's a pretty rich challenge considering it's making use of assets from a game in which you grow parsnips all day. As you die or

conquer runs, you're treated to a quick rundown of your stats. Speedrunners should be nice and pleased about that.

EN ROGUE

The only trouble with *Stardew Valley - Roguelike* is that it's a minor pain to install. The mod hasn't been updated for a while and, as such, it isn't compatible with the current versions of the community-built *Stardew Valley* modding API or the game itself. Mercifully, you can roll *Stardew* back to an older version (you'll want to do legacy 1.5.6) and find a legacy build for the modding API on Nexus Mods: I used 3.18.6. From there, it's just like any other mod, and should leave your saves untouched since it takes place away from the farm in The Abyss.



LIKE A PROOF OF CONCEPT FOR SOMETHING EVEN BIGGER

It feels like a persuasive proof of concept for something even bigger. While probably infeasible for a mod, I couldn't help but think how much more of a time vampire *Stardew* might be if the Adventurer's Guild mine was just a mini-rogue-like with big boss encounters and upgrades. I never really cared for *Stardew*'s combat before the mod – it's janky and stiff at the best of times – but I found an affectionate remix in *Roguelike* that gave me a better sense of the game's variety of weapon options and combat strategies. All it had to do was push me a little more with a timer and some new bosses.

Regardless, it's an emblem of one of modding's timeless truths: no matter how chill and open-ended your game is, someone out there is waiting to gamify the sandbox, turn it upside down, and make their own fun in ways that seem counterintuitive. If *Stardew Valley* is ConcernedApe's birthday present to the world, *Stardew Valley - Roguelike* is like taking the box it came in and sledding it down a hillside. Far from the original intent, but still pretty gnarly. ■



GET STARTED IN

WH40K: DARKTIDE

It's a great time to try Fatshark's grimdark murderfest. *By Sean Martin*

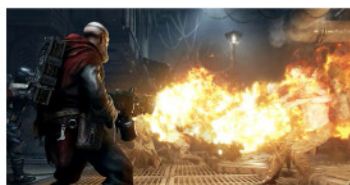
NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Hard

TIME
15 hours

VITAL LINKS

The best *Darktide* Arbites build:
pcgamer.com/games/fps/warhammer-40k-darktide-arbites-build-best/



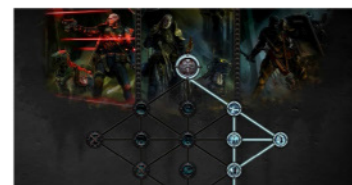
OUTCLASSED

1 Your first step in *Darktide* is choosing your class: you can focus on ranged weapons with the Veteran or Ogryn, melee with the Zealot, or choose something a little more freeform with the Psyker or the new Arbites class. Each one has their own customisable talent tree.



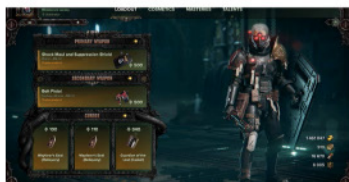
REJECT REJECT

2 After picking a class, you'll have to choose your character's backstory. None of these choices will impact gameplay, but they will change your characters' dialogue. The most important choice is their voice, since you'll be listening to it for the next 100 or so hours.



TOP TALENTS

3 As you complete missions, you'll gain points which you can spend on your Talent tree to unlock new skills and passives. There are 30 levels altogether in *Darktide*, each of which gives you a point to spend. Completing missions will also unlock higher difficulties.



WEAPONS AND CURIOS

4 It's usually a good idea to take a melee weapon for crowd control, then a powerful ranged weapon to pick off troublesome elites and special enemies. Curios will also buff you once you unlock them – the best way to get these early is via Mystery Acquisitions.



MASTER BLASTER

5 One of the newer systems that Fatshark has implemented is Mastery. As you mow down heretics, you'll earn Mastery Points that you can spend to unlock specific Blessings. This takes the RNG out of things.



OMNISSIAH'S BLESSINGS

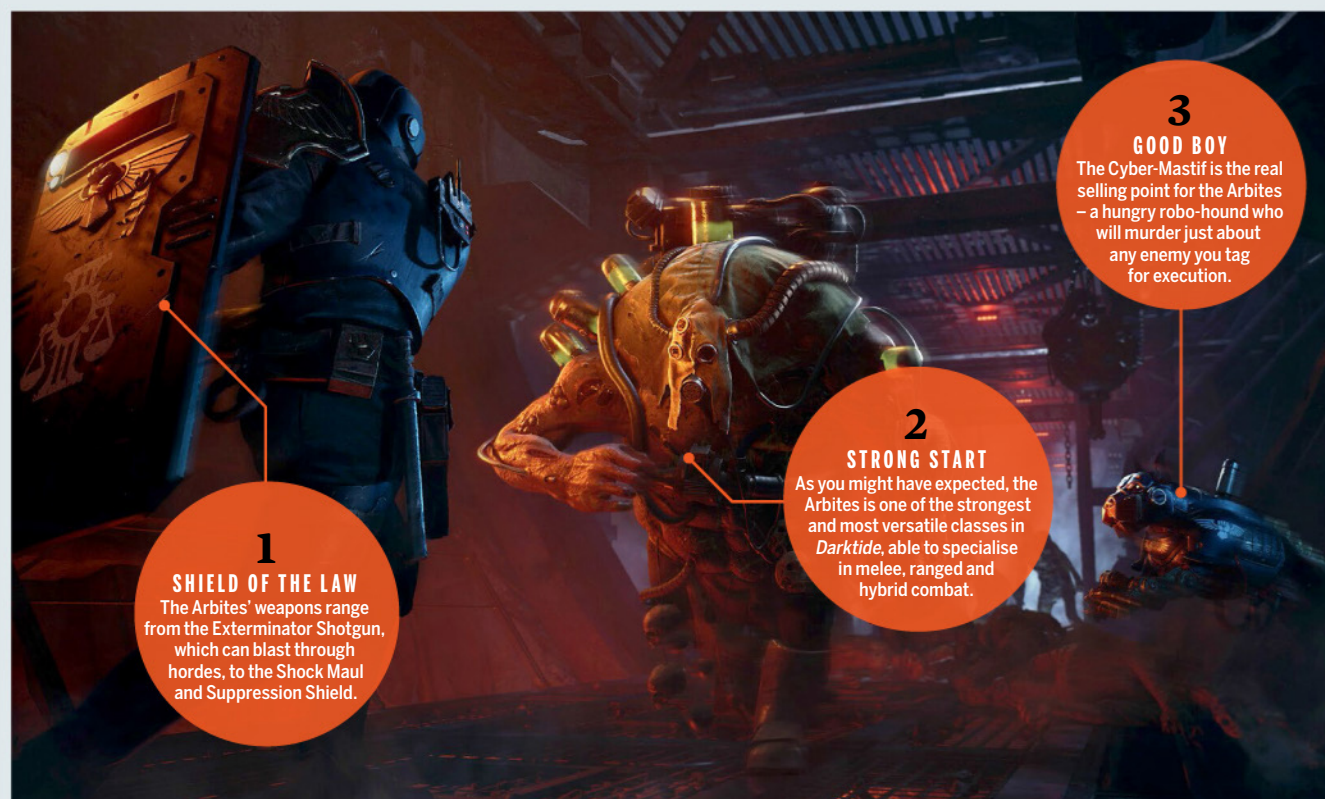
6 So, how do you tweak your weapons? You can do this at the Shrine of the Omnisiah. Consecrating weapons will increase their rarity. Empowering levels their stats, and then you can Refine to tweak perks.



SCAVENGER HUNT

7 There is a catch to weapon upgrades, you'll need Plasteel and Diamantite. You can find both currencies during missions if you hunt around and open yellow containers – Plasteel is a series of cylinders, while Diamantite is a little box with a glowing blue core.

I FOUGHT THE LEX *Say hello to Darktide's new Judge Dredd class*



1

SHIELD OF THE LAW

The Arbites' weapons range from the Exterminator Shotgun, which can blast through hordes, to the Shock Maul and Suppression Shield.

2

STRONG START

As you might have expected, the Arbites is one of the strongest and most versatile classes in *Darktide*, able to specialise in melee, ranged and hybrid combat.

3

GOOD BOY

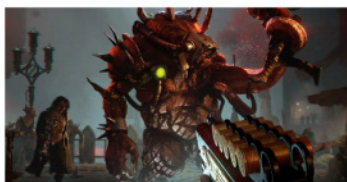
The Cyber-Mastif is the real selling point for the Arbites – a hungry robo-hound who will murder just about any enemy you tag for execution.



ON THE MOVE

8

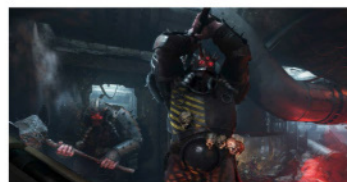
Now we've talked about weapons and currencies, what about playing the actual game? One key tip is to learn how to dodge, move, position and push. Maintaining movement will prevent you getting swarmed, while pushing enemies makes space if you do get trapped.



STICK TOGETHER

9

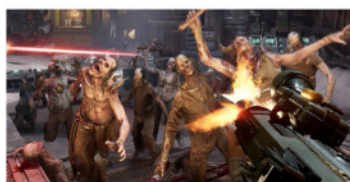
There are lots of enemies who immobilise you in *Darktide*, necessitating a rescue from another player. No matter how good you think you are, it's important to stick reasonably close to at least one other teammate. This way, you can help each other out.



PRIORITISE TARGETS

10

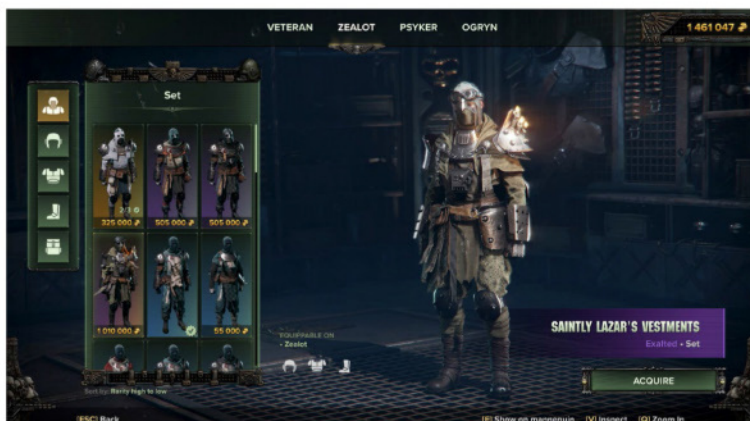
The third most important thing in *Darktide* is focusing on dangerous elite and special enemies. Use the tag system (middle mouse button) to ensure your teammates are aware of the danger. If you're an Arbites, doing this twice will direct your dog to hunt that enemy down.



CHOOSE YOUR BATTLEFIELD

11

Since enemies chase you, there's often no reason to choose poor ground to make your stand. Why fight a boss close to a chasm when you could bait it elsewhere? Why face a horde where it can surround you when you could funnel them through a doorway?



STYLISH SLAYER

12

The final most important thing in *Darktide*? Fashion. Though the game has a premium cosmetic shop, remember that you can earn cosmetics through Penances or buy a whole selection for in-game money at the Commissary.

A close-up, low-angle shot of a vampire character from the game Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines. The character has pale skin, green eyes, and red lipstick. They are wearing a dark green, high-collared garment. The background is dark and out of focus, showing some architectural details.

BEING CHARMING IN VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE — BLOODLINES

PART 5

The violent world of LA's vampires is no place for a silver-tongued popinjay. *By Ian Evenden*

Ugh. Sewers. When Cyprian Maggard was embraced into the vampire lifestyle, he was wearing a fetching red outfit, and for a long time saw no reason to change it having become part of Clan Toreador, a bunch of manipulators, party schmoozers, and all-round aesthetes. Being up to his finely clad ankles (he's wearing a heavier suit of clothes now, but they're probably still Italian) in the waste products of his prey species isn't at all what he expected.

He's on the trail of the Nosferatu, the most damned and disfigured of the vampire clans, who are hiding down here... somewhere. It's one of the least liked parts of a game that's generally considered to be pretty good, filled as it is with dead ends, apparently infinite monsters, and only one tricky way through that's easy to miss. The sewers are also huge, built by a public sanitation company that clearly intended for them to be used as thoroughfares, why else would they have convenient paths either side of the channel, high ceilings, and full lighting. Perhaps the Nosferatu built them.

There's a convoluted system of reservoirs and flood controls, but once the monsters are dealt with there's a neat section involving a pump that requires the vampire Celerity skill – the ability to move at great speed that you can't use in public – to get past. But then there's just more swimming through pipes and punching things, though eventually a new enemy type, a big fat guy with claws who can also throw green energy balls, appears. He's basically a miniboss and can take a lot of punishment.

THE HORROR, THE HORROR

What's next really is a miniboss – a horrific Tzimisce creation made from three blended bodies drops from the ceiling, kills a security guard and, of course, attacks Cyprian. It's lethal up-close, but there's a walkway it can't access where he can stand with his shotgun, and someone's stashed a handy ammo crate nearby too. It throws the bodies of dead security guards at him while he kills it, which would have made a mind-blowing fight 20 years ago. If only there weren't so many struts and pillars around to get in the way.

The only exit is through another pipe, and further into the sewers Cyprian encounters new versions of that boss, but oddly they don't react to him unless he gets very close, allowing him to pick them off easily from range. It's probably a bug, but he's not complaining, their distended split bellies are most upsetting. The sewers are so full of monsters it's amazing the vampires have managed to keep their masquerade up for so long – a twisted flesh creation rising from the toilet bowl hungry for blood should be a common occurrence for local residents.

Speaking of blood, Cyprian is low on the red stuff having had to use his vampire powers to heal and pick

HE'S ON THE TRAIL OF THE NOSFERATU, THE MOST DAMNED OF THE CLANS

locks, but with all the humans down here dead he's forced to feed on rats like a filthy Nosferatu. He feels disgusted with himself, but at least his shirt stays clean.

Following the sacrifice of an anonymous vampire who just happens to be carrying the pass key to the Nosferatu lair, Cyprian is soon face to face with Gorgeous Gary Golden, the leader of the sewer dwellers. He's a former movie star who's lost his looks somewhat in the transition to vampirehood, and he wants Cyprian to head to Chinatown on the trail of the Ankarar Sarcophagus, something that had got rather forgotten about with all the monster-punching that's been going on.

Gary's got a supermodel friend, too, Imalia, who wants him to plant a camera in the apartment of her rival in an attempt to ruin her reputation. This sounds like it could be a lot of fun, so the main quest can wait.

IN THE BACK DOOR

Exiting via the sneaky back stairs to the Nosferatu warren that would have been a million times more convenient to enter through than fighting through the sewers, Cyprian pops up in the same Hollywood cemetery in which he did such a bad job of fighting zombies. The dead are quiet tonight, however, and Cyprian once again rues the game's lack of an easily available map or way of moving quickly around its hubs. Following a brief pause at a bus stop, he finds his way to Tawni Sessions' apartment, but there's a problem. She's at home. And not alone.

This looks like a job for Dominate, a vampiric power that can make NPCs ignore you, but Cyprian doesn't have it. Instead, he's forced to sneak behind the back of Tawni and her armed boyfriend/bodyguard, placing the three cameras without being seen. It takes several attempts, and when Cyprian gets back to Imalia she acts like he blew it. If he wasn't such an even-tempered vampire, he'd be really upset.

THE RULES

1. Don't kill innocents.
2. Don't fight: scheme and manipulate instead.
3. Avoid losing humanity as much as possible.



» Cyprian heads to Chinatown, introduces himself to the local boss – a Kuei-jin vampire by the name of Ming-Xiao – then witnesses a kidnapping. The Tong crime syndicate has nabbed a restaurant owner's daughter, and he's the next step in locating the Ankaran Sarcophagus, so it's up to Cyprian to get her back. Conveniently, the Tong are holding her at a massage parlour a stone's throw from where she was snatched, so it's easy for Cyprian to track her down.

She's a total spoilt brat, not even remotely grateful for being rescued from being nailed up in the corner of a room, possibly because the Tong couldn't take her attitude. Whatever, it gets Cyprian the information he needs, and the next missions pass in a haze of gunfights, trips to nightclubs and a run in with the Mandarin, who puts Cyprian through a series of experiments before also being shot in the head many times.

PARTY TIME

Thanks to the information Cyprian has gathered, his next mission is to raid the Giovanni mansion. The Giovanni are a new vampire clan, a family that likes to keep things close, and tonight they're having a party – invitation only.

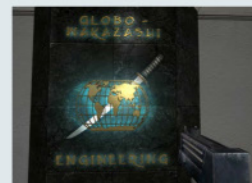
They're also adept at raising the dead, so after Cyprian alerts the guards outside while attempting to persuade some partygoers to hand over their invites, he's left shooting not just guards but zombies and a family elder. Eventually, having trapped the elder in a corner and repeatedly interrupted his reloading animation, they're all lying dead, or even more dead than they already were. It was meant to be an infiltration mission.

However, the end justifies the means. In the basement of the mansion is the Ankaran Sarcophagus, the MacGuffin Cyprian has been chasing for months. First though, there's the small matter of the Chang brothers, a pair of teleporting, extremely agile and well-armed Kuei-jin who tell Cyprian about an alliance his patron LaCroix has made with the Chinatown vampires before they die. LaCroix will deny it later, of course.

So what's inside the sarcophagus? Nobody knows. It still won't open, and one Dr Ingvar Johansen is required to help. He's an innocent human who doesn't know vampires exist, yet has been kidnapped by vampire

ARE WE THE BADDIES?

The confusing corporate identities of VTMB



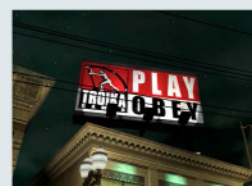
GLOBO-WAKAZASHI ENGINEERING

A logo straight out of the *Deus Ex* school of subtlety. What could it possibly mean?



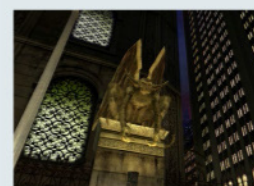
FU SYNDICATE

The font, the lighting, the fact it's emblazoned on the greyest chunk of concrete in Chinatown. Not friendly.



TROIKA GAMES

In these postmodern times I'm all for developers appearing in their own games, but is that really the slogan you want?



STATUES

How could an organisation with these outside its HQ be anything other than humanitarian and benign?

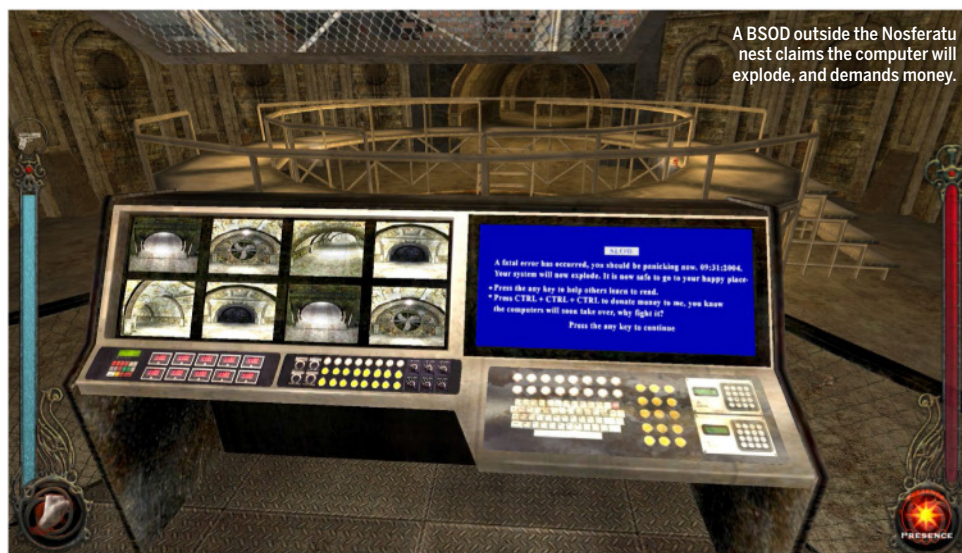
hunters known as the Society of Leopold. Beckett the archaeologist suggests Cyprian kill them all, but also not let on to Johansen about his true nature.

Great. In the subsequent shootout on the beach and murder spree inside the society's monastery – Cyprian has long since given up on being charming at this point, but still isn't killing innocents or losing Humanity points – the game really starts to show its age. There are so many guards, all of whom are angry, identical, and capable of shrugging off headshots, that it freezes and gets stuck in audio loops. This is on a 13th-gen Core i9 which gets 60fps out of the game on its iGPU, so it must have been

hell on contemporary equipment.

The society members have laced their home with mines, which can be turned against them with a quick computer hack. To make things even better, they're storing explosives below the building, and in the grand tradition of videogame grunts have chosen to gather around them, waiting for a shot to set them off. This section ends with a boss battle against a teleporting sniper even Kojima would cringe at, before a timed run out of the caverns before they collapse. Dr Johansen doesn't make it, but Cyprian has the information he needs.

Back in LA, the Sabbat have attacked LaCroix's tower and he wants me to kill them all. This Diary was conceived on the idea of VTMB being a game it clearly is not. This is a





ABOVE: Gary Golden's rat dinner party for skeletons: not a Michelin star in sight.

THE SABBAT HAVE ATTACKED LACROIX'S TOWER AND HE WANTS ME TO KILL THEM ALL

shooter with pointy teeth and a character sheet rather than an immersive sim à la the first *Deus Ex*. The early game may give you room to use powers and your vampire clan affiliation to get around problems, but the end of the game is boss after boss after gunfight, and they're much less interesting than the emergent situations.

BOSS RUSH

And so it goes. The Sabbat base in the Hallowbrook Hotel is assaulted, a flamethrower coming in handy to barbecue them with LaCroix' compliments. Tzimisce lord Andrei turns up again, and after a chat with Ming-Xiao (who has the key to the sarcophagus) Cyprian is sent up to an observatory to battle werewolves. After this, and with a price on his head thanks to the secret pact between LaCroix and Ming-Xiao, he gets to fight vampires too. Then he chooses LaCroix over Ming-Xiao even though the prince just tried to have him killed (his constant sucking up to his boss seems to have paid off), and is sent to Chinatown to take down the Kuei-jin and get the sarcophagus key, after which it is

opened and turns out to be full of explosives thanks to Jack, the guy Cyprian met right at the beginning of the game, killing both the prince and his loyal agent. Oh, Cyprian. That sucking up didn't pay off after all.

It's been said that 68% of players won't see the end of a game, and this is used as both an argument for shorter experiences, and for developers to front-load their games with the good stuff, because why hide your best work somewhere people will never find it? My save file for this Diary stands at 27 hours, and that's with the back end of the game rushed without many sidequests investigated.

Now, all that's left to do is load up an older save file and send Cyprian back out to the streets of LA and Santa Monica to find out what's happened to Heather (who was told to stay at the apartment), discover whether a certain cute but demented nightclub owner still remembers him, and maybe try being charming for once. ■





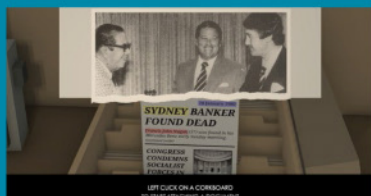
WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

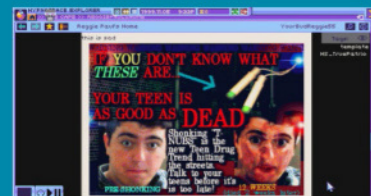
DATABASE DETECTIVE GAMES

Sterling students of the rabbit
warren school of narrative design

By Jess Kinghorn



FAR LEFT: When you hear 'database' I'm sure your next thought is 'digital,' but *A Hand with Many Fingers* is pleasingly analogue and lo-fi.



Let's confront the soggy fish-lady in the room – yes, I have played basically all of Sam Barlow's FMV oeuvre. Though I enjoy *Telling Lies*' escalating betrayals, and *Immortality*'s big supernatural swings, *Her Story*'s murder mystery served 30 seconds at a time remains the most successful execution of the database detective formula.

The later Half Mermaid games feature minutes-long clips that in theory players will jump around and scrub through. However, in practice, the pacing grinds to a halt as I watch the entirety of a table read or one quiet side of a video call. The arbitrary time limit on *Her Story*'s seconds-long clips supports the investigative momentum better – however! Your investigative legwork tends to boil down to keyword searches and pressing play; though the question of how the puzzle pieces click together is always burbling away in your noggin', Barlow's live-action games are arguably quite passive experiences.

So, let me venture outside of the Half Mermaid paddling pool in search of other databases that better explain why I so love to stick my beak in. I've joked before that my brain is a mess of red string, so *A Hand with Many Fingers* giving you not one but two corkboards to criss-cross drew me in immediately.

As you work to uncover a conspiracy straight out of recent history, there's the creeping sense someone somewhere would much rather you reeled your beak in. Though not a horror game by any stretch, *A Hand with Many Fingers* makes the most of its limited presentation to gently prod at your paranoia – should you be worried about that car idling outside?

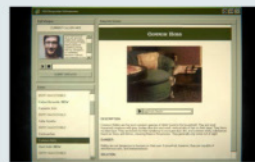
Don't get me wrong, I loved the corkboard family tree offered by *The*

UNUSUAL SUSPECTS

Recommended investigations



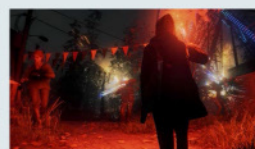
ANALOGUE: A HATE STORY
Chiller about an abandoned ship, and two onboard AI assistants to help you unravel the mystery.



HOME SAFETY HOTLINE
Is it mice? Is it bed bugs? No, it sounds like a supernatural entity you've inadvertently pissed off.



NOT FOR BROADCAST
Rather than poring over archival material and scrubbing through clips, you're doing it all live.



ALAN WAKE 2
Though I was left wanting more from its gameplay, this mystery remains a real page turner.

Roottrees are Dead, not to mention that game's multi-layered, actually helpful hint system. But there's something to be said for *A Hand with Many Fingers*' complete lack of, uh, hand-holding. It's also one database detective game that actually grapples

BARLOW'S LIVE-ACTION GAMES ARE ARGUABLY QUITE PASSIVE EXPERIENCES

with the malleability of the evidence you're amassing; I'll always remember cracking open an important box from the archives only to find it completely bare, a clear result of someone covering their tracks a little too well.

No Case Should Remain Unsolved explores this fragility a step further, tasking you with finding order among your protagonist's fragmented

memory. You're presented with snippets of conversation about the disappearance of a child, all muddled up in terms of order or who even spoke the words.

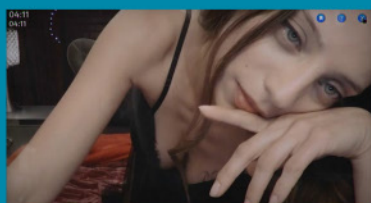
Sifting through the initially disconnected mess constantly challenges your understanding of the case, and repeatedly forces you to re-evaluate details you'd previously taken for granted.

FANCY THREADWORK

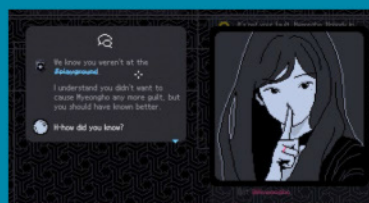
I'd be remiss if I didn't at least mention *Hypnospace Outlaw*. Upon an alternate but no less crispy '90s internet, netizens no longer fight over the family desktop but instead don a techy headband to surf the web in their sleep. Between web-pages hosting tributes bookended by cringe GIFs, and a surprising number of conspiracy theorists terrified their Hypnos headbands are slowly turning their brains into beef, you're tucked into this funhouse mirror reflection of ye olde internet as a voluntary content moderator getting paid less than nothing. It goes about as well as you'd expect.

Netizens react to how you choose to heft your ban-hammer, with at least one unwitting copyright striker announcing their immediate departure from Hypnospace with an essay entitled 'Speaking my piece'. But it's not just this pretence of a reactive community that keeps me logged on – it's the alternate universe bangers. Between dad rock anthem Ready to Shave, and the frozen-over instrumentation of the Cool Punk genre, music is used as a wonderful worldbuilding tool.

I can't get enough of how *Hypnospace Outlaw* uses nostalgic soundfonts to project a playfully warped reflection of an internet I sort of remember. And that's what database detective games are all about: disappearing down a rabbit hole, and ending up somewhere totally unexpected. ■



LEFT: Alright, I confess! I'm guilty as charged, your honour.





Things can only
get better.

KINGPIN: LIFE OF CRIME

From junkyard dog to king of the urban jungle. *By John Strike*

Like almost every game I played during the 1990s and early 2000s, my love of brutal FPS *Kingpin: Life of Crime* started with a free demo on the PC Gamer cover disk. Back then, its wall-to-wall bloodletting, prolific swearing and killer soundtrack were like flames to my inner moth.

It's hard to imagine a more exciting time for the genre than in 1999. *Half-Life* had basically just conquered the world the year before, and a trail of breadcrumbs and bratwurst would lead to *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* in 2001.

With the hum of *Quake II*'s minigun still ringing in our ears, lesser-known developer Xatrix Entertainment had just finished its first official expansion, *The Reckoning*, and was about to launch

Kingpin: Life of Crime using the same brilliant engine.

ULTRAVIOLET DREAMS

"You're aware this game is for adults?" warned the nice lady at the end of the phone, as I casually ordered the full version of *Kingpin* using my mum's bank card. The combination of its graphic violence and the timing of its release, shortly after the Columbine shootings, lead to calls for its cancellation in the US Congress, and ultimately fewer retailers selling the game there.

Xatrix's CEO, Drew Markham, stated at the time, "*Kingpin* was never intended for children. This is a game with mature themes made for a mature audience," which was a sentiment that had reassuringly found its way to me when purchasing the game. Still, putting a big red button in front of 16-year-

old me and saying, "Don't press the big red button," obviously made it all the more appealing at the time, and with legendary hip-hop group Cypress Hill leading the soundtrack, this was a game I couldn't wait to get my hands on.

Set across a variety of grim retro-futuristic areas, from slums, through sewers, to industrial sites, train yards and eventually the big city, *Kingpin* is your revenge-fuelled journey from deadbeat to crime boss.

In a similar way to *GTA 2*, it marries a grimy 1930s art-deco style with a feeling of advanced industrial technology. Characters in the game range from bums to thugs for hire, some sporting tattoos and piercings, some clad in bionic-looking masks and armour, and near enough everyone in the game hostile, including the player.

LET IT REIGN

The first few levels are really about establishing a foothold and reaching



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
1999

PUBLISHER
Interplay

DEVELOPER
Xatrix Entertainment

LINK
steam.com

BOTTOM: Some of the lighting effects have aged really well.



that sweet spot where you've got a cache of ammo, a powerful enough weapon, and plenty of health to ensure success.

That's reflected in the first level which is actually pretty tough, and it feels much more strategic than most later levels. I always wondered if the difficulty of level one was at odds with the reputation of the game, when you believe *Kingpin's* all about shooting and swearing, and the first 20 minutes require real care, thought and patience.

You begin the game lying down, not in bed, but bleeding and half dead in an alleyway, having been beaten to a pulp by a pair of Nikki Blanco's thugs. Your first line, "I'm gonna bury those two motherfuckers," is a real corker, and there's no looking back from here.

I instantly find a lead pipe and wonder if I've accidentally stumbled into a plumbing simulator, though reassuringly the first vagrant I meet sells me a crowbar for a dollar. The second vagrant I meet threatens to

MARRIES A GRIMY 1930S ART-DECO STYLE WITH A FEELING OF INDUSTRIAL TECHNOLOGY

beat the shit out of me for looking at his girlfriend. The third is lying on a mattress in an alleyway, drunkenly gesticulating. I take a closer look just to make sure it isn't Oliver Reed, then he offers information in exchange for whisky.

I turn right towards a Heilman Shipping sign, down an alley and immediately stumble into two armed heavies, who simultaneously yell "Rat fucker!" and shoot me to death.

I start again and turn left this time towards a Pawn-o-Matic store, one of many safe places dotted throughout the game where I can buy gun mods, ammo, armour and health. The cigar-smoking shopkeeper offers me a free pistol in exchange for a Heilman condenser coil. I have no idea what that is but my first mission has just begun.

I head back to the alleyway guarded by the pair of meatheads, who I carefully sneak past when the ball game on their radio distracts them. I race through corridors and

BAD SEED *The games running riot in Kingpin's DNA*

25% QUAKE II FEEL
Driven by the QII engine, the ambient lightmapping is distinctive throughout.

35% GTA 2 MISSION SYSTEMS
Imagine playing *GTA 2* in first person without the cars. The crazy errands and retro-future vibe reside in both of these games.



25% REDNECK RAMPAGE PROFANITY
Baddies unnecessarily swearing at you as they shoot you feels familiar here.

15% SOLDIER OF FORTUNE GORE
Turning someone's head into flying red blocks with a shotgun is a very Raven move.



When your health's low the shop owner complains about you bleeding on his floor.



BELOW: Two NPCs on bodyguard duty.



warehouses to an isolated office, where I'm challenged by a fat bloke who looks like a cross between Jim Royle and Al Capone. He's guarding a juicy-looking safe, so I batter him with the crowbar, leaving his hat on the floor and his cigar still puffing away in his mouth.

I haven't got the code for the safe but I grab a bottle of whisky and find the condenser coil, in what's rapidly turning into a really dark shopping errand.

I head back to Pawn-o-matic and pick up my firearm, then reunite the bum on the mattress with his bottle of whisky, before he spills the code for the safe. It's worth sneaking back into the warehouse as there's a sack of dollars waiting in the safe, in addition to the fat dead man. Now I can hire some muscle and buy a magnum mod for the pistol.

My third and final trip back to the two thugs in the alley is with a modified pistol and a hired buddy by my side, who's essentially offered to be brutally shot to death for \$10. A profanity-laden gunfight ensues and within moments we're standing in a pool of ketchup, the ball game still playing on the radio.

Though probably the most intricately woven, this is one of many

missions that thread through each level of the game. Again, similarly to *GTA 2*, you find yourself running the most bizarre errands to progress through the levels, albeit not from a bird's eye view, and without columns of Elvis impersonators.

RIOT STARTER

The descent of a Kingpin conversation



The jobs you take range from searching for a car battery, to beating an unruly tenant and his dog to death so you can take a stolen wrist watch back to a grateful landlord.

One of the most memorable missions from later in the game comes after you find Big Willie in a club toilet (behave yourself). His girlfriend, Lizzie, has been kidnapped, so you have to blast your way through her captors until you find her decapitated body on the deck of a boat. In a poignant moment, which is really the only time we see compassion in the whole game, our character mutters, "Look what they did to her." And of course, this is *Kingpin*, so I have to hand-deliver her head to Willie in order to progress.

RED LIGHT VISIONS

Originally, *Kingpin*'s developers had a Night City-esque Blade Runner vibe planned for the game, but as hip-hop group Cypress Hill came on board, the developers steered the backdrop away from neon lights and Vangelis, and more towards dark urban criminality and street rap.

They provided instrumental backing tracks from their Cypress Hill IV album, including Checkmate, Lighting Strikes and 16 Men Till



There's No Men Left that can be played on loop or heard on radios throughout the game. Lead vocalist B-Real, real name Louis Mario Freese, even voices some of the characters. His distinctive tone is used for all of the club door men as well as The Jesus, the tough-as-nails Hispanic street boss surrounded by flesh-eating pit-bulls. There's no doubt the group's influence helped steer the subsequent direction of the game, and the soundtrack helps reinforce the feeling of nostalgia any time I play back through it.

Playing the game today, *Kingpin*'s weaknesses lie in its textures and clunky combat, but the game's spirit is very much alive and ready to play.

It has its surface-level quirks such as the way going near a rat causes the player to shriek in agony, or the way the Pawn-o-Matic shopkeeper denies having any cool guns in the early levels, despite clearly having all of the cool guns lined up on racks behind him. These all fall into amusing niggle territory as *Kingpin*'s positives vastly outweigh its negatives.

Kingpin's USP on release was its high level of violence and profanity, which is understandable given it was one of the first games, even prior to *Soldier of Fortune*, to include

KINGPIN'S USP ON RELEASE WAS ITS HIGH LEVEL OF VIOLENCE AND PROFANITY

dismemberment and pain skins. Retrospectively though, it achieved a lot more than what it became best known for. Indeed there are several mechanics where it quite simply did better than *Half-Life*.

Unlike Valve's behemoth, you can choose positive or negative interactions with NPCs, provoking different outcomes, usually either, "Get me a thing and I'll give you a thing," or, "Fuck you," followed by a firefight, but either way this gave *Kingpin* a unique depth in 1999.

When chatting with characters you can sheath your weapon for a Florence Nightingale approach, launch a verbal tirade and see what happens, or, of course, simply open fire on all their asses.

The artificial intelligence that drives the NPCs is also remarkably good, particularly when you team up with them. From the first interaction, they'll stop, follow, attack or even crack a safe. Not even *Half-Life*'s lab technicians could crouch down and

follow you through air vents or jump across obstacles, and *Kingpin*'s NPCs can, and will, do it all.

No other game in 1999 had you rummaging through a dead man's pockets for money to hire NPCs, trading goods for information, or modifying weapons using stolen cash, all in the same level.

These mechanics are supplemented throughout the game by really neat sounds and audio. The sparks when your safe-cracker blasts open's Nikki's safe are dazzling. The splutter your taxi driver makes when he asks for his 20 bucks and you put a shotgun shell in his face are blood-curdling. Even the, "Awghuaghugh!" wobbly lip sound you make when you accidentally try and climb an electrified fence is both ludicrous and hilarious.

CASE CLOSED

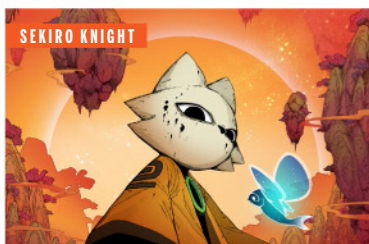
Kingpin's only real crime is its length, at around a disappointing three hours for a full play through. Slipgate Ironworks released a *Reloaded* version of *Kingpin* on Steam in 2023, but the purist in me only has eyes for the original, and it seems there's more entertainment to be garnered from reading *Reloaded*'s reviews than there is playing it. ■



HARVEY RANDALL



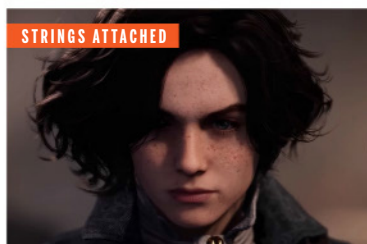
I don't have parry fatigue. I've been saying turn-based RPGs aren't dead for years. I still enjoy roguelikes and deckbuilders. I am basic, but I am free.



NINE SOLS

shop.redcandlegames.com/projects/ninesols

→ *Nine Sols* is peak – gorgeous and well-designed enough to contend with *Hollow Knight*, but with a parry-based *Sekiro* twist. A refreshingly linear story, a banger soundtrack and some top-tier boss design for the genre. Don't miss one of 2024's best games like I did!



LIES OF P

liesofp.com

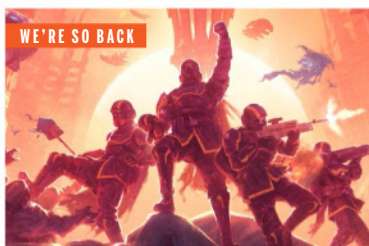
→ If you want something a little more traditional for your *Sekiro* fix, look no further. *Lies of P* definitely wears its inspirations on its sleeves, but it deserves to do so without judgement – because it's really rather good. Also, its new DLC added a gunblade. I rest my case.



ELDEN RING: NIGHTREIGN

en.bandainamcoent.eu

→ If this surprises you after the last two recommendations, I'm clearly not communicating properly. *Nightreign* is a bastard: it's unforgiving, fast-paced and rough around the edges – I have lots of problems with it. And yet I keep going in for more. Erdtree save me!



HELLDIVERS 2

arrowheadgamestudios.com

→ *Helldivers 2* has rinsed through the 'we're so back' to 'its so over' cycle so many times, it's hard to keep track. But its latest updates, like city maps and the Illuminate, have elevated it – if you had a good time in 2024, it's worth heading back to check out what's new.

MUST



PLAY

**A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW**

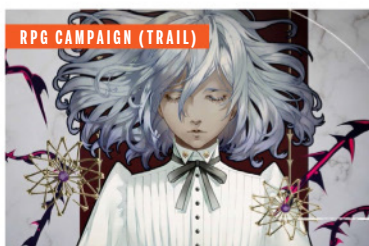
by Harvey Randall



CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

expedition33.com

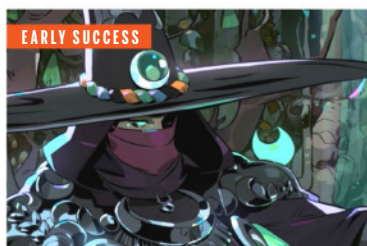
→ *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* is spectacular – punching way above its budgetary weight. Not only is it a solid RPG with an excellent story and some killer twists, it's one you can actually knock out in a weekend – or two, if you want to do all the optional bosses. A hearty 'oui' from me.



METAPHOR: REFANTAZIO

metaphor.atlus.com

→ But Harvey, what if I want an RPG that I can't finish in a weekend? *Metaphor: Refantazio*'s got you. An epic with some stellar worldbuilding that hinges on a democratic campaign trail where you're bidding for fantasy president. I promise it's more exciting than it sounds.



HADES 2

supergiantgames.com/games/hades-ii

→ *Hades 2* is already surpassing the first game in terms of depth, replayability and its soundtrack. I can't put into words how bonkers Darren Korb and his coterie of incredible musician friends have gone on this thing. Grimy sax solos and obscene drumbeats abound.



TACTICAL BREACH WIZARDS

shorturl.at/5cPLb

→ I recommended *Tactical Breach Wizards* the last time I did a 'Must Play', and I'll keep doing it until they lock me up. It's a clean, excellently-designed 20 hours of turn-based tactics fun. Its superb writing is just a bonus. If you can only play one game on this list, make it this one.



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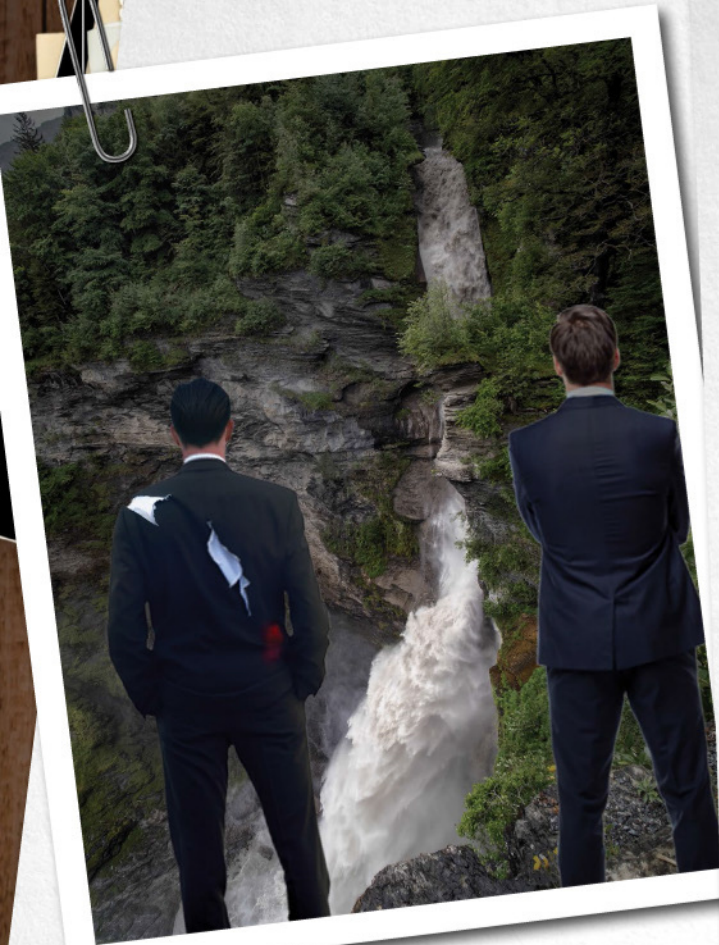
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IT'S ALL OVER...



THE PCG INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: **THE FINAL PWN**

PART 5

"Rise and shine, Mr Ray-Tracing. Rise and shine. Wake up and smell the ashes of the gaming industry." I came to groggily, covered in blood, on a narrow ledge overlooking the chasmic descent of the Reichenbach Falls. Standing ahead of me was a figure gazing out over the falls. I clambered to my feet, unsteady, holding my hand to the rock face for support. "Dick Ray-Tracing in the flesh," the character said, turning. "I took the liberty of relieving you of your weapons, while my friend here, Claus, helped carry you from the balloon wreckage." Stepping through a fine mist of spray generated by the falls, Bill Clencher, CEO of MegaCorp's Console Gaming division, dismissed his operative with a wave, the wiry youth retreating down the ledge's narrow pathway.

I involuntarily coughed, an action that wracked my torso with pain and caused me to wince. "Broken ribs from the crash I deduce, Dick, and I'd be oh so concerned about that bullet wound, too," Clencher said. "Looks fatal to me. I'm sure Housebrick and Stickyfellow would've been very concerned for your well-being if they were still here but, you just had to go ahead and murder them," Clencher continued before theatrically tutting. "No matter. Their tireless work and sacrifice have helped lead us, the Console Gamer Collective, to our final victory. Realising our grand vision to systematically dismantle the free videogame industry, to slowly warp the idea of game ownership from owned physical products to transient, un-owned access passes to digital subscription services, and to cream hundreds of millions of dollars in executive pay for ourselves in the process."

"Clencher, I should've known it was you," I said through gritted teeth. You're the criminal mastermind behind the CGC. You, along with Stickyfellow and Housebrick, are the men responsible for more than half the videogame industry's pain and suffering. It is you who has been the corporate cancer at the heart of the gaming industry for more than 20 years!"

"It was so easy, Dick," Clencher scoffed. "I couldn't be more of a corporate suit, but I just dressed like a dudebro one day and said 'Halo' a lot and console gamers suddenly loved me, the gullible fools. It didn't matter what studios I bought, mismanaged, gutted and shuttered, or how many devs lost their jobs thanks to MegaCorp's buyouts, meddling, and financial rug-pulls, I just said 'cloud gaming' and was called the future of gaming. And now, with MegaCorp owning three of the four biggest game publishers on Earth, and console gamers eating out of my subscription-based, cloud-gaming hand, I've won, Dick, and you've lost."

TO BE CONTINUED...

...UNTIL **SEPT 11**

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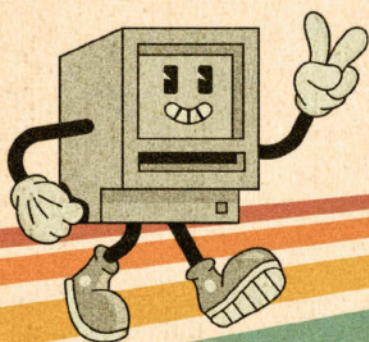


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2025



Welcome

With more than one hundred thousand games available on Steam today in 2025, as well as thousands of new games added to that number every year, filtering those games down into a list of just 100 top titles feels a bit doolally.

But here at PC Gamer I think we're all just a little bit crazy (shouldn't everyone be?), and we also have one of the most passionate editorial staff in the gaming industry today.

As such, the PC Gamer team has advocated, fought, and voted for the top 100 games we think are the finest PC gaming experiences in 2025. Ok, maybe we're actually all more than a bit crazy. Enjoy!

Robert Jones

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
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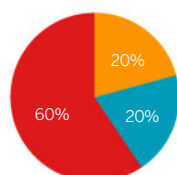
OUR VOTING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

Around 30 of PC Gamer's editors, writers and other staff were invited to rate games based on three categories we deem most important to earn a place in the Top 100. We want to recognise historical importance, how well the game plays today, and also to give space for newer games with fresh ideas. Most importantly, though, we just need to really love each game we pick.

1 PC Gamer's writers vote for their favourite games across three categories.

2 The total score for each category is divided by the number of people who voted, to create an average score.

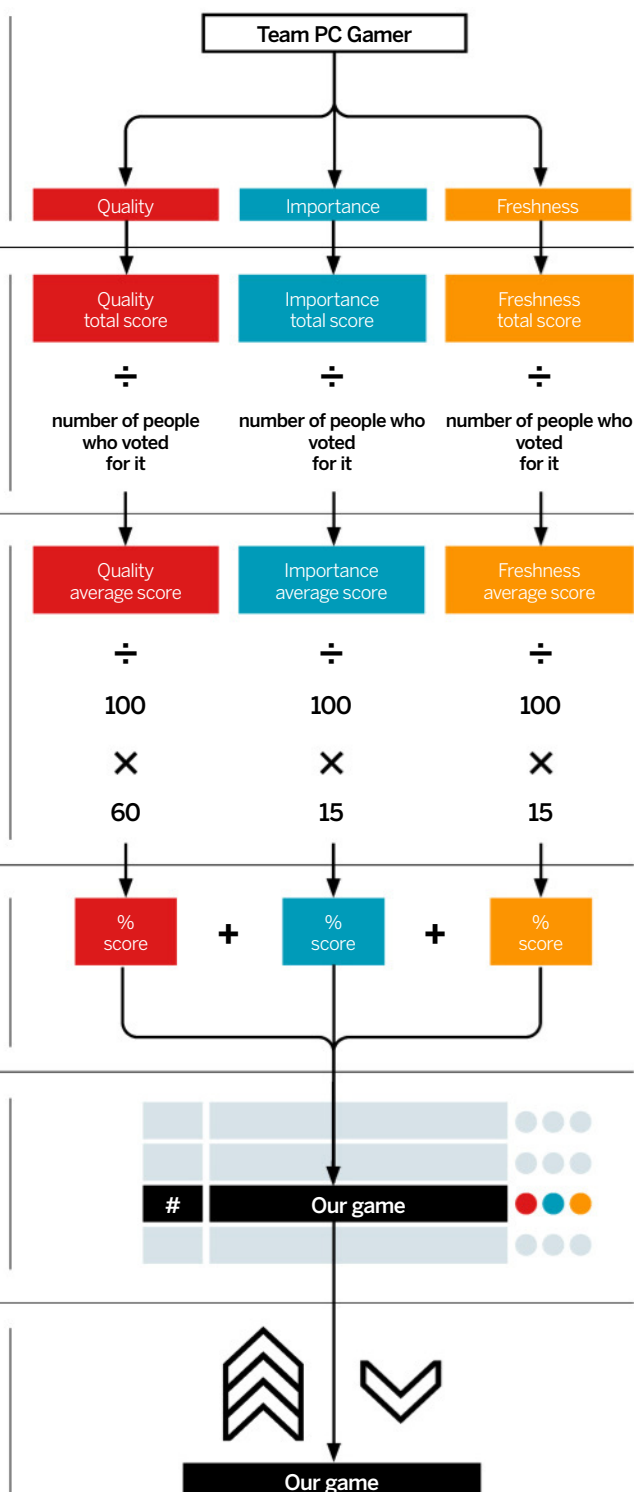
3 The three averages are split according to our special weighting.



4 The scores are then combined into an official Top 100 score, using maths and secrets.

5 The final scores are put in order to give us our provisional top 100 games list.

6 Writers can then demote or promote one game each, using arguments and democracy.



PERSONAL PICK

Harvey
Randall



LIES OF P:
OVERTURE

Lies of P: Overture is one of the best soulslike DLCs to ever grace the genre. The base game, which I finally committed to a full playthrough of, is really solid.

Overture, meanwhile, is peak all the way through—showing us that Round 8 Studios has found its own identity in a sea of imitators. If *Overture* is any indication, Round 8's next game will give FromSoftware a run for its money.

PERSONAL PICK

Joshua
Wolens



UPLINK

Uplink consists of a BBS dialler and a list of IP addresses and somehow it's the best open-world game I've played. It turns you loose, points you at a fake internet, and lets you do whatever the heck you want. Who among us hasn't immediately gotten nabbed by the cops for an ill-judged day-one attempt to hack a bank?

100

UNAVOWED

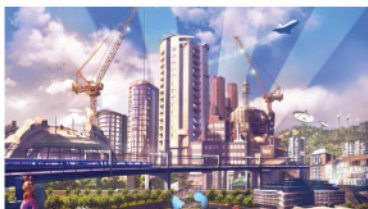
RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 210.6 | PROMOTED BY Robin Valentine

Quality 8.75 Importance 5.75 Freshness 7.00

Fraser Brown: I'm relieved that *Unavowed* managed to slip in at the end—though it deserves to be much higher. This is Wadjet Eye's best adventure game, and thus simply one of the best adventure game's ever made. A smart, pleasingly tangled supernatural story, a fascinating roster of supernatural investigators—from a hardboiled fire mage to a spirit medium with a tiny BFF—waiting to help you on your cases, clever puzzles that don't

outstay their welcome—I love it. If you've got an appetite for urban supernatural affairs like *Dresden Files* or *Constantine*, you're gonna have a great time.

I'd be remiss not to mention Wadjet Eye's newest adventure game, though. *Old Skies* didn't make the Top 100, but while it's not quite as bold as *Unavowed*, which has a whole BioWare-adjacent companion system, it's one of the best time travel stories around, with solid puzzles and a story that'll gut punch you.



99

CITIES: SKYLINES

RELEASED 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 213.12

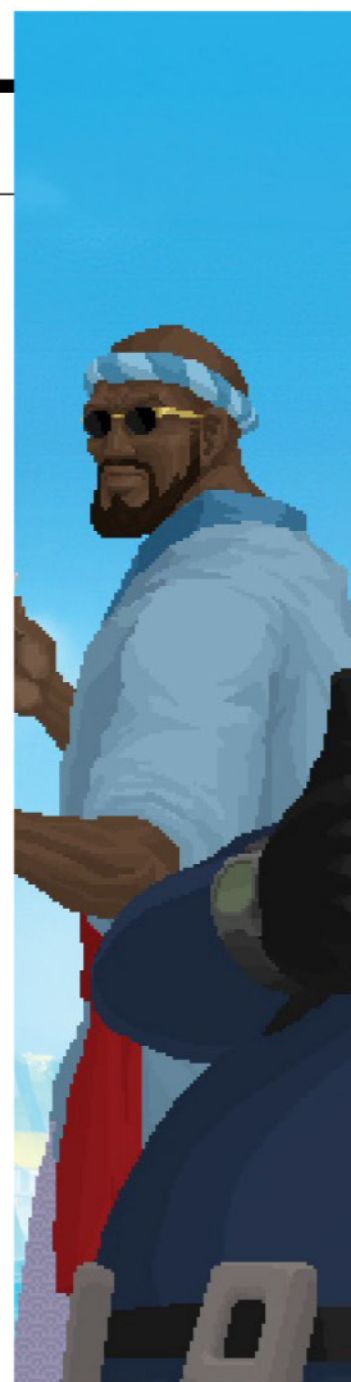
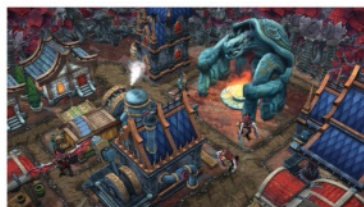
Fraser Brown: The recently released sequel has dented the brand a bit, but the original *Cities: Skylines* remains a supremely impressive city builder, regardless, elevated by years of quality DLC and mods. It's better than the follow up in nearly every regard—including being considerably better looking, too. *Cities: Skylines* is an absolute genre classic.

98

AGAINST THE STORM

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 213.8

Evan Lahti: It strikes a perfect balance of resource-accumulation cosiness (bake pies for frogs, brew beavers beer, make your heat-loving lizards extra happy by assigning them to work in a kiln) and managing the looming stress of the storm, which pours on ever-increasing hardships that drive your animal and human villagers away or kill them outright.



97

DAVE THE DIVER

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 218.2

Quality 7.56 Importance 6.70 Freshness 7.00

Evan Lahti: This quaint-seeming underwater platformer is actually a bottomless array of features and minigames. "Surely weapon upgrading will be the last feature I unlock," you naively say to yourself before unlocking a photography system, fish farming, seahorse racing, and a multi-hour sea-people storyline. Otherwise, the over-the-top anime cutscenes (one of the DLCs introduces Godzilla) pair well with Dave's coastal calm.

The game's other great stroke of genius was centering that experience on a chubby, middle-aged diver who just wants to retire in tropical bliss. Dave is such an immediately lovable character, a guy who feels like he's just as vaguely bemused by all this weirdness as you are.



96 SHADOWRUN: DRAGONFALL - DIRECTOR'S CUT

RELEASED 2014 | TOP 100 SCORE 218.4

Jody Macgregor: I like games where wizards and warriors go into a dungeon, avoid traps, fight monsters, and emerge with a pile of loot, and I also like games where hackers and cyborgs go into a corporation, avoid cameras, fight security guards, and emerge with a cache of data. *Shadowrun: Dragonfall* looks at the similarities between fantasy dungeon crawls and cyberpunk heists, takes one in each hand, and says, "Now kiss!" The result is a turn-based RPG full of warped takes on the clichés. The dragon doesn't demand tribute, they host a talk show and demand attention. The dwarf doesn't craft magic swords, they code leet warez. And the hub's not a fantasy town, it's an anarchist collective in the middle of Berlin.



95 DUSK

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 218.4

Ted Litchfield: The trailblazer of indie boomer shooters is still hard to beat after seven years and hundreds of lo-fi, movement and exploration-heavy FPSes released in its wake. *Dusk* remains fresh and surprising, even on repeat playthroughs. It manages breathtaking visuals that once again show how art direction can trump fidelity. *Dusk* is also very funny.

94

METAPHOR: REFANTAZIO

RELEASED 2024 | TOP 100 SCORE 219

Quality 7.78

Importance 6.58

Freshness 6.58

Harvey Randall: Not into *Persona*? I wasn't, either, and it didn't matter—even if you aren't comparing it to some of Atlus' other games. *Metaphor: Refantazio* stands on its own two leather boots as an excellent JRPG. It's bursting with intriguing fantasy politics, well-written characters, and a main villain I absolutely did not develop a strong crush on. Stop asking.

Fraser Brown: It might not be the highest-ranked JRPG on this list, but I remain convinced *Metaphor* is the greatest JRPG ever made, taking all the good stuff from *Persona 5* and sticking it in a better game. As an added bonus: no more school.

Mollie Taylor: *Persona's* rag-tag teen shtick is losing its relatability as I barrel into my 30s, which makes me all the more grateful *Metaphor* exists. Fantasy, politics, and a whole heaping of hot villains to love-hate.

93

HOTLINE MIAMI

RELEASED 2012 | TOP 100 SCORE 219.2

Jake Tucker: Fast, brutal, and utterly hypnotic, *Hotline Miami* is a game that grabs you by the throat and demands attention. It's a puzzle game at heart, with every room being a conundrum solved only through violence. You slam through doors, batter white-suited Russian gangsters with hammers (and other bits), and do everything in your power to survive in this top-down fever dream of neon, blood, and carnage. It's twitchy, unforgiving and a total headfuck if you pay attention to the story.

All of this is threaded through with a killer soundtrack that pulses through the entire game. Each track doesn't just accompany the violence, it feels like it drives it, surreal electronic music that amps up *Hotline Miami's* grim atmos.



92

LETHAL COMPANY

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 219.4

Elie Gould: Multiplayer wackiness is at an all-time high right now and that is thanks in large part to this hilarious co-op horror game, which is loaded with quality and laughs. The best part? Zeekerss just gives players all the tools they need to create some zany moments and unforgettable memories and then just stands back and lets everyone get on with it.





91 MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR

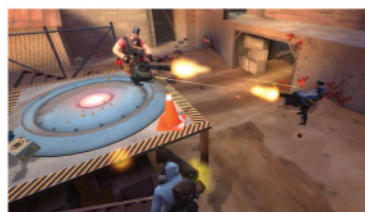
RELEASED 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 219.43

Lincoln Carpenter: Alright, so the 2024 edition was pretty donked up. But *MFS 2020*'s 1:1 scale virtual Earth remains one of the most impressive technical marvels in videogames, one that's responsible for the closest I've ever come to having a spiritual experience with a controller in my hands: soaring forth and feeling firsthand how terribly small we are.

90 TEAM FORTRESS 2

RELEASED 2007 | TOP 100 SCORE 219.6

Rich Stanton: Still the pinnacle of the class-based shooter, the world's premiere hat simulator, and the exemplar of how to build-out and maintain a truly community-driven title. Valve continues to issue periodic updates, too, albeit using crowdsourced content, and every so often still surprises fans by doing things like releasing a new comic.



88 THE SIMS 4

TOP 100 SCORE 220.2

Mollie Taylor: Other life sims have attempted to knock *The Sims 4* off its throne (most recently *inZoi*), but it continues to be top dog. If you're willing to look past a small loan's worth of DLC, *The Sims 4* still excels with a well-oiled simulation, and a superb build mode I wish more games would crib from.

87 SUBNAUTICA

TOP 100 SCORE 220.33

Elie Gould: I can't go any deeper than up to my shoulders in the sea so it just goes to show how much I love *Subnautica* for all its beautiful corals, intuitive crafting, and fun base building that I'm able to stomach the sickening thalassophobia. Timeless survival crafting goodness.

86 ROCKET LEAGUE

TOP 100 SCORE 220.5

Joe Donnelly: *Rocket League* is the epitome of 'easy to learn, difficult to master'. At top-level, it's a football-aping sports sim about small cars knocking around a massive ball inside a cage. But beneath this veneer lies a game of skill, tactics, aerial mastery and astute physics manipulation.



89 PEAK

RELEASED 2025 | TOP 100 SCORE 220.2

Quality 7.50 Importance 6.40 Freshness 7.80

Harvey Randall: *Peak* came out of nowhere and climbed to the top of my estimation—it's basically everything you'd want out of its genre of friendship-based co-op fun. You and your friends must ascend while maintaining your stamina, naturally crafting moments of peak physical comedy via the power of positional voice chat and a physics engine that hates you. Or you can just yell at your co-workers. I'm over it, Mollie, don't worry.

Morgan Park: Totally. I also love that

Peak is adjacent to, but not mimicking, the crop of co-op friendly horror games spawned from *Phasmophobia*. Unlike *Lethal Company* or *REPO*, *Peak* is bright, inviting, and enduringly simple. Yet that doesn't betray a level of skill and coordination needed to clear its highest peaks. You can feel the expertise of two skilled indies in *Peak*. Yes, it was mostly made in a month, but there's high craft here.

Mollie Taylor: Help me up that damn cliff next time, Harvey!



85

THANK GOODNESS YOU'RE HERE

RELEASED 2024 | TOP 100 SCORE 220.8

Quality 7.90

Importance 5.50

Freshness 7.60

Kara Phillips: Still one of the only games that has made me ugly cackle at my PC. I'm still not convinced I understand what a comedy slapformer is, but I know for sure that I want more of them. Especially if Matt Berry is somehow involved. *Thank Goodness You're Here!* is filled with minigames that are as unsettling as they are entertaining.

Phil Savage: It's an absurdist satire, sure, but also incredibly loving in its homage to Northern England. An absolute delight, finally beating out *Jazzpunk* for me as the best comedy on PC.



84 HALO: THE MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION

RELEASED 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 221

Rich Stanton: It doesn't feel like Microsoft knows what to do with *Halo* these days, but luckily it got one thing right: *The Master Chief Collection* is the definitive way to enjoy the series' golden years. It's a generous package too: Five superb Bungie titles plus the half-decent *Halo 4*, with multiplayer modes aplenty including co-op and crossplay functionality.

83

ECHO POINT NOVA

RELEASED 2024 | TOP 100 SCORE 221

Morgan Park: *Echo Point Nova* is a sprawling open-world FPS for trickshot sickos. It's co-op *Doom* for friends who'd spend entire nights trying to do cool stuff in a *Tony Hawk* game or *Skate*. It's the "yes and" movement shooter unconcerned with rational speed limits and unapologetically made for a mouse. It's the cure to boomer shooter bloat, all killer, no filler.

Echo Point Nova is a beautiful object that I'm continually impressed by: 1-4 player co-op that's equal parts arena shooter and extreme sports platformer. It's got *Crackdown* agility orbs. You can slap stickers on your hoverboard. There's a modifier to turn on friendly fire, and another that makes the floor lava.





82

CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

RELEASED 2025 | TOP 100 SCORE 221.63

Quality 7.53

Importance 6.90

Freshness 7.45

Jess Kinghorn: The isolated residents of Lumiere know their days are only ever counting down. Every year the paintress across the sea wakes to inscribe a new number upon her monolith. If you're that age or older, well, time's up and you 'gommage', becoming nothing more than petals upon the breeze.

Staring down this end, the titular expeditioners instead choose to spend their final year of life taking the fight to the paintress through many, many

turn-based fights. The twist here is that combat features an element of timing, with perfect parries against nightmarish painted creations netting you devastating counter attacks.

Marinated in the angst of many classic console JRPGs from the early oughts, *Clair Obscur* wrings out its existential set up for all its worth with a cast of party members I'm actually close in age to. This French-developed RPG has since become my whole personality.



81

BLUE PRINCE

RELEASED 2025 | TOP 100 SCORE 221.97

Chris Livingston: I never would have guessed there'd be a fresh take on the now-ancient 'walking around a mysterious house solving a bunch of puzzles' genre—but then *Blue Prince* became a nearly year-long obsession for me. Its roguelite elements can be occasionally frustrating, but the depth of the mansion's mysteries make this one of my favorite games.

80

STELLARIS

RELEASED 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 222

Robin Valentine: Though recent DLC and support has been uneven at best, this nearly 10-year-old 4X remains a wonderfully rich and dense simulation of a whole galaxy's worth of life, culture, and inevitably war. At this point in its life, it has almost every sci-fi trope you can imagine covered, playing out like a grand and remarkably coherent mash-up of every space sci-fi series.



PERSONAL PICK

Ted Litchfield

PATHFINDER:
WRATH OF THE
RIGHTEOUS

WotR saw me through catching Covid, and I think its excellent union of hardcore crunch with BioWare-style comfort food fantasy really presaged *Baldur's Gate 3*. Owlcat has only added to the game since I played a year after launch, and I definitely have to revisit this one to check out all the DLC—and finally try *Rogue Trader*, for that matter.

PERSONAL PICK

Wes Fenlon

NINJA GAIDEN 2
BLACK

The most vicious combat ever in a Japanese action game, finally given the rerelease it deserves in a polished UE5 remaster. You ain't ninja'd until you've sliced three dudes' heads off with a single Flying Swallow or skewered a hellbeast on a scythe as tall as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. The idiom "all killer no filler" was actually invented to describe this game.

The Top 100

79 CULT OF THE LAMB

TOP 100 SCORE 222

Kara Phillips: One of those games you expect to keep you entertained for a couple of hours, but quickly becomes an all-consuming entity that perfectly blends cult management and heretic slaying roguelike mechanics. There is nothing better than running your own little cult full of woodland creatures.

78 TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER 3

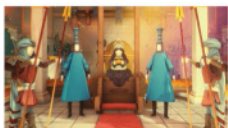
TOP 100 SCORE 222

Jody Macgregor: The joy of early TW games was the zoom. Order a block of soldiers around, then scroll the mousewheel and watch soldiers charge. The game gives us back that joyous spectacle, because when you zoom in it's no longer dudes with spears, it's a bear-rider slamming into hot pink daemons.

77 WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH

TOP 100 SCORE 222

Joe Donnelly: What *Remains of Edith Finch* arrived towards the end of the walking sim craze, but it is, for me, the pinnacle of that movement. In telling the titular character's poignant family story, it is one of the most imaginative, creative, thoughtful, heartfelt and truly unpredictable adventures.



76 ALIEN ISOLATION

RELEASED 2014 | TOP 100 SCORE 222.32

Rich Stanton: The best licensed game ever? *Alien: Isolation* is one of those rare examples of a game that truly 'gets' the source material, and its setting of Sevastopol is a brilliant slice of retro-futurist design that takes all its cues from the *Nostromo* while still feeling like its own place. Probably the single best piece of Alien media outside of the first two films.

75 MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 223.13

Wes Fenlon: Oof, it hurts to put *World* here over 2025's *Wilds*, but the newer game's sublime monster-killing action can't overcome its flaws: PC performance, lacking challenge, and promising environment systems it does practically nothing with.

Lincoln Carpenter: While *Wilds* is in need of a redemption arc it may never get, *World* is a complete package.



74

CYBERPUNK 2077

RELEASED 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 218.57 | PROMOTED BY Ted Litchfield

Quality 7.67

Importance 6.81

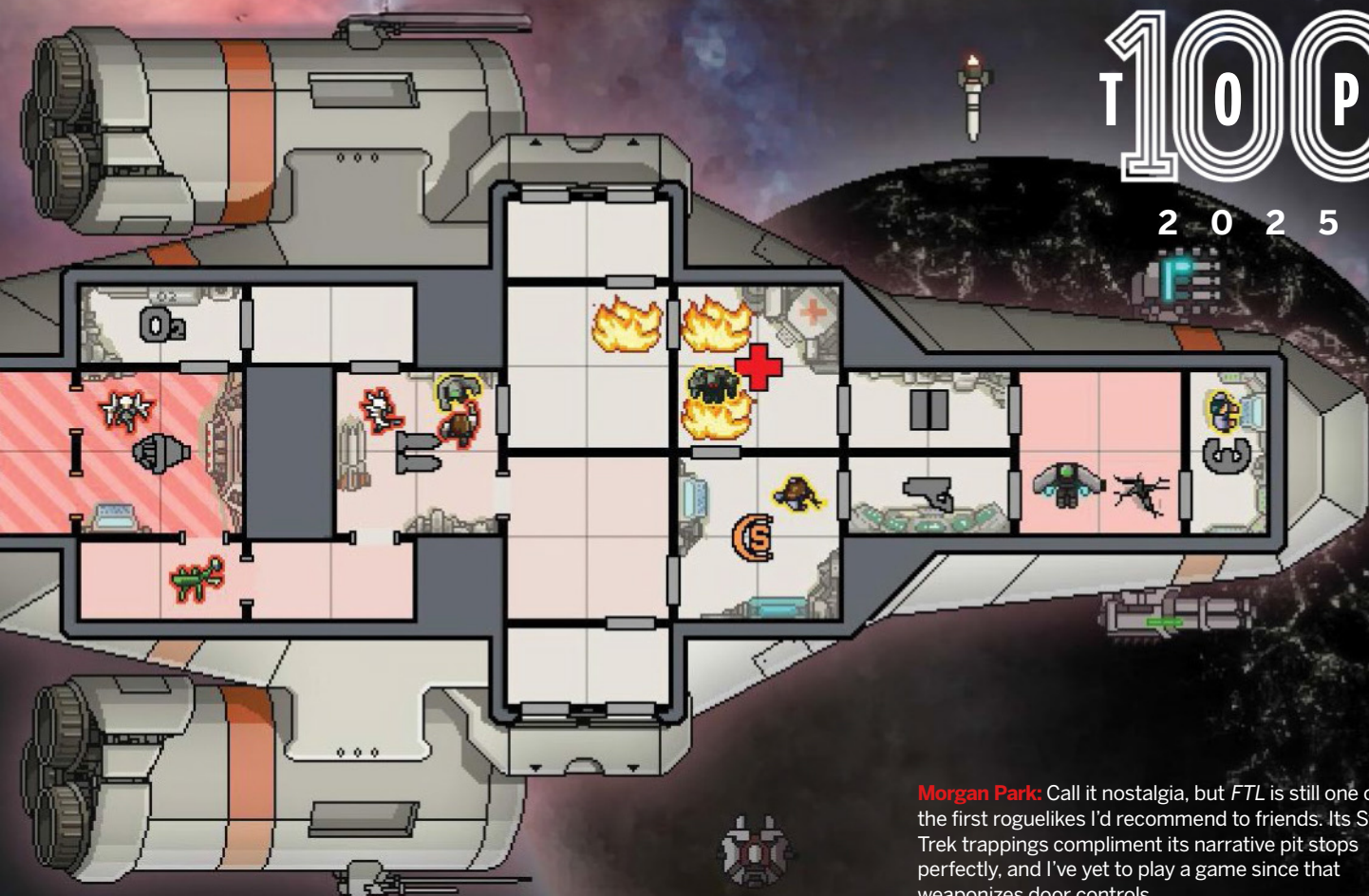
Freshness 6.62

Ted Litchfield: Sorry haters, I didn't need a Netflix anime or balance patch to realize a simple truth in December 2020: *Cyberpunk* was always good. Sure, its many patches really made it sing, but I took the long view from the start: Many all-timer RPGs (some further down this list) were overambitious, uneven, and technically quite shit at launch. CD Projekt, you watch the streets, Troika will watch the skies.

Night City is a triumph, a union of

seriously impressive graphical grunt and brilliant art direction that has 2077 remaining a benchmarker's favourite. *Cyberpunk*'s main quest is better plotted and paced than *The Witcher 3*'s, too, while it continues CDPR's industry-leading standard of quality and quantity for side content. The sidequest centering on a VR recreation of Christ's Passion made out of an actual snuff film is pure Philip K. Dickian sci-fi excellence, and one of my very favorite quests in RPG history.

T100P
2025



73

FTL: FASTER THAN LIGHT

RELEASED 2012 | TOP 100 SCORE 223.41

Quality 7.76 Importance 7.76 Freshness 6.18

Morgan Park: Call it nostalgia, but *FTL* is still one of the first roguelikes I'd recommend to friends. Its Star Trek trappings compliment its narrative pit stops perfectly, and I've yet to play a game since that weaponizes door controls.

Evan Lahti: I'm surprised to see it make our list. I think countless roguelikes have made meals out of its ingredients that leave *FTL* looking like the primordial soup of modern roguelikes.

Wes Fenlon: Playing the more recent (also great!) *Cobalt Core* reinforced for me that *FTL* nailed the essentials; there's so much room for panic, disaster, triage, and triumph in the moments you're micromanaging your crew.

Harvey Randall: *FTL*, a game that can be summed up as: Space hates you. Space hates you so much.



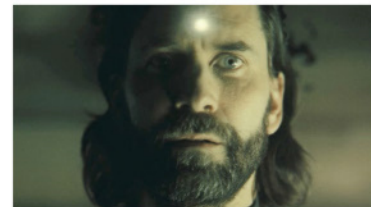
72

VAMPIRE SURVIVORS

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 223.57

Wes Fenlon: I'm a certain kind of sucker, and that kind is "put *Castlevania* stuff in a game and I'll play it." *Vampire Survivors* pioneered a certain type of breezy time wasting, but after becoming a smash success it began stacking on secrets, characters, and just more more more. It's generous in a way I haven't seen since *Terraria*. Still, it took the *Castlevania* expansion to make me fall in love.

It offers structure *Vampire Survivors* lacked, with a castle to progress through and a huge cast of heroes to unlock by defeating a lore-appropriate boss or upgrading a key weapon, like a grenade into a rocket launcher. Call it Unlocking Fun Toys: The Game.



71

ALAN WAKE 2

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 224.42

Elie Gould: A truly horrifying experience that somehow makes me feel impressed and grateful for all the wonderful quirky monstrosities as they scare the living daylight out of me.

Kara Phillips: When Elie recommends a horror game, it's always a good move to listen. No one knows horror games like them, and this was one they simply couldn't stop talking about.

PERSONAL PICK

Robin
Valentine



DEEP ROCK
GALACTIC
SURVIVOR

As you read this, this truly excellent take on the *Vampire Survivors* formula will be gearing up for its 1.0 release on September 17.

Despite having already lost nearly 100 hours to it in Early Access, I suspect I'm going to be sucked in all over again by the addition of an entire new gear system in the full release.

PERSONAL PICK

Mollie
Taylor



FIELDS OF
MISTRIA

It may still be in early access, but *Fields of Mistria* is the only farming sim to give me the same fuzzy feelings (and complete time blindness) as *Stardew Valley*. Sprinkle in extra magical girl goodness and a Game Boy Advance-adjacent artstyle, and it stands on its own as a ridiculously cosy experience. Plus, it's perfect on the Steam Deck.

70

SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY

RELEASED 2005 | TOP 100 SCORE 224.57

Quality 8.14 Importance 6.86 Freshness 6.14

Morgan Park: Our staff tends to skew toward the Looking Glass lineage of stealth games, but *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* is the sneak-em-up I keep installed for a rainy day. The controls are a bit weird now, but *Chaos Theory* is still unmatched in terms of pure sneaking. Sam Fisher's dynamic crouching animations build tension when approaching guards, and Michael Ironside's commanding performance is still a treat.

But really, it's the levels that make *Chaos Theory* an amazing replay to this day. The cargo ship, the bank, Hokkaido—Ubisoft just nailed it on the third go-around. What stands out about *Chaos Theory* now, and why I still consider it fresh compared to today's stealth genre, is its tight, linear encounter design that offers multiple solutions without giving so much freedom that challenge is optional (the *Far Cry* and *MGSV* approach).



69 GRAND THEFT AUTO 5 ENHANCED

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 224.73

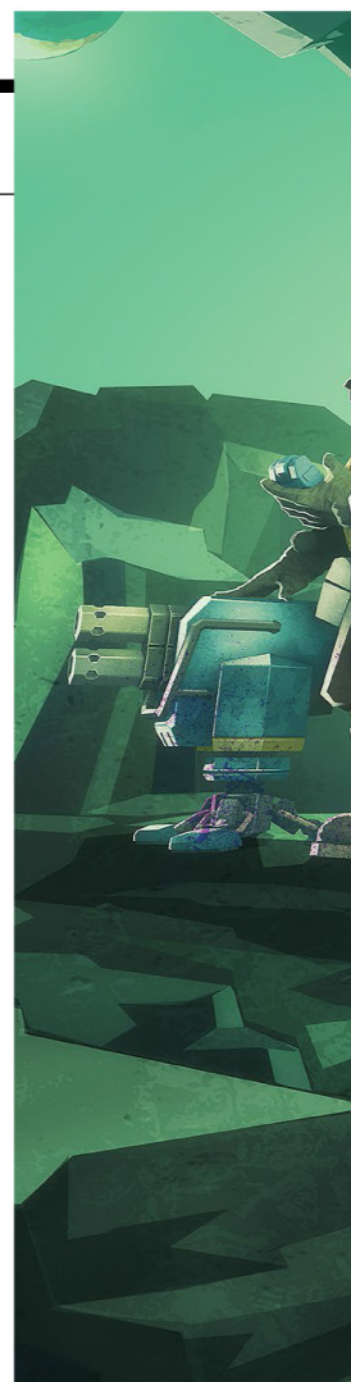
Joe Donnelly: *Grand Theft Auto 5* is the best open-world crime simulator out there today. Driven in part by the success of its now standalone offshoot *GTA Online*, *GTA 5* has shown remarkable staying power—with its Legacy and Enhanced editions both staples of Steam's most played charts. *GTA 6* is coming, but, right now, *GTA 5* still ain't going anywhere.

68

RESIDENT EVIL 2 (REMAKE)

RELEASED 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 224.73

Joe Donnelly: Survival horror has made some phenomenal strides in recent years, with a deluge of remakes reimagining a golden era of the genre for newer audiences. *The Resident Evil 2* remake is pretty much responsible for that, taking us back in time with Leon Kennedy and Claire Redfield as they fight to survive Raccoon City's zombie apocalypse.



67

DEEP ROCK GALACTIC

RELEASED 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 225

Quality 7.80 Importance 7.10 Freshness 7.00

Robin Valentine: *DRG's* popularity isn't just enduring, it's wonderfully enthusiastic—no other online multiplayer community is anywhere near as relentlessly positive. And I really think that's a reflection of the kind of game *DRG* is.

It's not just about coordinated violence, it's

about true cooperation—working together to creatively solve tricky problems. And thanks to some of the best deployed procedural generation in the industry, those problems are ever-fresh, as you discover unique and endlessly surprising environments with your fellow

dwarves.

Meanwhile, the atmosphere of blue collar camaraderie and the entirely uncynical progression system wonderfully foster a sense of genuine dwarven pride. Rock and stone, to the bone.

Rory Nantz: Did I hear a rock and stone?

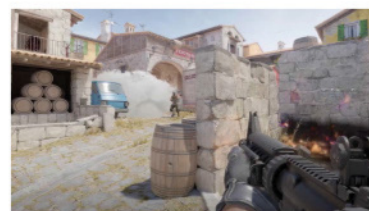


66 MASS EFFECT LEGENDARY EDITION

RELEASED 2021 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.16

Robert Jones: The fact that this remastered trilogy is frequently going for five bucks/pounds on Steam is just ridiculous, as it delivers the definitive way to play the entire *Mass Effect* trilogy, which remains buckets of fun today in 2025. Yes, sure, the trilogy's quite clunky third-person cover shooting now feels a little dated, and the whole Paragon/Renegade morality system is childishly simple, but the world, characters and writing remain great reasons to board the Normandy.

Tyler Wilde: The military conspiracy plot is a bit more *Call of Duty* than I would've admitted back in the day, but the *Mass Effect* trilogy is still, even now in 2025, the most I've felt like the Picard of a little spaceship.



65 COUNTER-STRIKE 2

RELEASED 2012 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.4

Rich Stanton: *Counter-Strike 2* is a very Valve game. It's billed as the first true sequel in series history, but it's really more about being the definitive version of the same competitive shooter we've been playing for decades, with the focus on improvements to things like smoke physics, UI and contemporary quality-of-life features.

T100P

2025

64

DIABLO 2

RELEASED 2000 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.55

Quality 7.36 Importance 9.00 Freshness 6.50

Tyler Wilde: I'm still not convinced that this genre is better with flashier lighting effects, non-stop rebalancing patches, and battle passes. The *Diablo 2: Resurrected* remaster is excellent if you want a more modern (but not too modern) way to play through a classic ARPG adventure that came out before hell had to be experienced through a film of live service craft.

Jake Tucker: *Diablo 2 Resurrected* made basically no changes and proved good design is eternal. Later *Diablo* titles always have a "but" in there somewhere, but *Diablo 2* is astonishingly fun, letting you steamroll entire dungeons for the sweet, sweet loot within.



63

GARRY'S MOD

RELEASED 2006 | TOP 100 SCORE 225.82

Phil Savage: I used to spend long hours surfing *Garry's Mod*'s server browser, just to see what strange, esoteric game modes I could find—like a hyperspecific Quantum Leap themed entirely around *Half-Life 2* assets and late-'00s internet humour. Maybe this time I'm a watermelon, racing other watermelons across an abstract obstacle course suspended in the air. Next time it could be anything—RP, bunnyhop platforming, zombie horde shooting, whatever the server owner had cobbled together.

Elie Gould: I went to dinner with some mates the other day, and it quickly just devolved into us talking about how much we miss playing *Trouble in Terrorist Town*. Thanks *Garry's Mod*!



62

STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC 2

RELEASED 2004 | TOP 100 SCORE 226

Robert Jones: Still, twenty years later, the most interesting Star Wars game ever made, as well as a fantastic (albeit unfinished) RPG. Some of the characters, but notably Kreia, are GOAT territory, and they're brought to life by mature and challenging writing that takes the Star Wars universe into areas no other Star Wars game, TV show, or film has done.



61 YAKUZA 0

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.2

Jody Macgregor: If somebody walks in at the wrong time they can get the wrong idea about a game. To my girlfriend, *Yakuza 0* is that game where you help weirdoes who want to be tough. Only she's right. I've heard "real fans" care about the plot and the oddball substories aren't a big deal. Real fans can get lost: *Yakuza 0* is about helping a kid buy a spunk mag.

60 ARMA 3

RELEASED 2013 | TOP 100 SCORE 226.61

Andy Edser: Few games are as crunchy as *Arma 3*, and that's probably a good thing. Twist your fingers around the unforgiving interface and put up with the woeful performance, however, and you'll find the milsim to end all milsims. It's the best "hike for two hours before being shot in a bush" simulator on the market, and at least one of those should make this list, right?



58 STALKER: CALL OF PRYPIAT

TOP 100 SCORE 227.17

Joshua Wolens: Some of us want to be the heroes of grand, sweeping fantasy narratives. Others want to be shot to death for a tin of Spam in a world that doesn't care about you. *Call of Prypiat's* ever-lovable, ever-janky Zone is the home of the latter camp, at least while GSC finishes cooking *Stalker 2*.

57 NIER: AUTOMATA

TOP 100 SCORE 227.6

Harvey Randall: Listen, I think we've all probably hopped on the 'haha, game with sexy androids' train when it comes to *Nier: Automata*. Behind that gentle mockery, though, is the understanding that Yoko Taro made one of the most effective, haunting, and unique action RPGs out there.



59

SATISFACTORY

RELEASED 2024 | TOP 100 SCORE 227.14

Quality 7.86 Importance 6.86 Freshness 7.43

Wes Fenlon: *Satisfactory* is a building game about optimization in the same way that eating is about ingesting calories. You could take the most boring path to efficiency, but wouldn't you rather spend weeks designing a series of artfully suspended conveyor belts that deliver pizzas straight into your mouth? Why live off chicken and broccoli when you could build a tower taller than god whose only purpose is producing the exact number of ingredients needed to assemble one perfect al pastor burrito every 15 seconds?

...It's possible this metaphor has gone way off track. But that's what *Satisfactory* is all about really: devoting hours to silly, elaborate, or mathematically precise constructs in whatever form you find creatively nourishing. Harnessing a huge open world sandbox of resources to graduate from making iron bars up to non-fusile uranium sometimes first requires building an elevated train network from one corner of the planet to the other, y'know?

56 SYSTEM SHOCK 2

TOP 100 SCORE 228

Joshua Wolens: Sorry to JC Denton, but *System Shock 2* is my favourite insim of all time. Its pitch-perfect horror, innumerable secrets, endless character builds, and absolutely unhinged techno soundtrack combine to produce a game I'll never stop coming back to as long as I live.



55

THE CASE OF THE GOLDEN IDOL

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 228

Quality 7.80

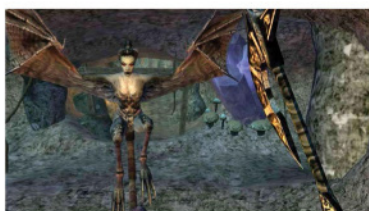
Importance 7.20

Freshness 7.40

Robin Valentine: Wonderfully intricate detective puzzles unfold into a bizarre and fascinating narrative spanning decades of alternate history. Also, everyone has the most brilliantly ugly faces you've ever seen.

Christopher Livingston: I know we sometimes play a game and think it would make a great movie (and

we're almost always wrong) but I would absolutely love to see Color Gray Games' adventure turned into a book. The story—the complete story we slowly piece together while solving bizarre murders—would be perfect for a sprawling, gritty, gruesome novel about a mysterious item that inspires brutality and backstabbery among any who possess it.



54 THE ELDER SCROLLS 3: MORROWIND

RELEASED 2002 | TOP 100 SCORE 228.14

Joshua Wolens: The last time Bethesda felt like it had something to say. *Morrowind* is a (spice) melange of influences ranging from *Dune* to *The Dark Crystal*, filled with murky morality and strange politics and set in one of the few fantasy worlds that feel actually fantastical. Also you can get so hopped up on Dunmer drugs you can kill god with a single blow.



53

PAPERS, PLEASE

RELEASED 2013 | TOP 100 SCORE 228.33

Wes Fenlon: I talked to creator Lucas Pope about how now this game feels, and he said that "You want your work to be relevant, but at the same time, wow, I really wish it was not that fucking relevant." If *Papers, Please* convinces even 0.1% of the people who play it that the global right-wing backlash against immigrants and asylum seekers is deeply wrong, it will be one of the most important videogames ever made.

Joe Donnelly: Few games evoke the 'life imitating art vs art imitating life' dichotomy quite like *Papers, Please*, and that's terrifying unto itself. But from a purely video game perspective, Lucas Pope's breakout hit is a super-smart management sim.

52

TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX SIEGE X

RELEASED 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 228.43

Quality 7.86 Importance 7.63 Freshness 6.88

Morgan Park: When *Rainbow Six Siege* launched disastrously in 2015, folks were understandably ready to write it off. But Ubisoft knew it had something genuinely unique on its hands, and ten years of updates later, *Siege* really has never been better.

The *Siege X* update (bad name, Ubisoft, go back to the old one) took a big swing by adding *Siege*'s first new

primary mode since launch: Dual Front is a 6v6 twist on *Siege* where teams have to attack and defend at the same time. I never thought I'd be in favour of a *Siege* mode with respawns, but here we are.

Tyler Wilde: I still haven't played another multiplayer shooter that makes swinging through a window or smashing through a wall as fun.



51

DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

RELEASED 2009 | TOP 100 SCORE 228.6

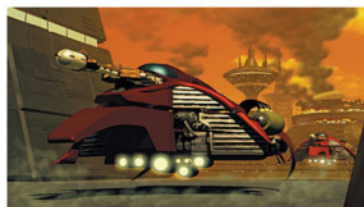
Robert Jones: A landmark fantasy RPG which, on release, laid the foundation for the genre for years to come. With funny and moving writing, an exquisite dark fantasy tone, GOAT characters like Witch of the Wilds, Morrigan, and full-fat RPG systems that let you play the game your way, *Origins* remains the best *Dragon Age* experience and a must-play for fantasy RPG fans.

50

SID MEIER'S ALPHA CENTAURI

RELEASED 1999 | TOP 100 SCORE 229.2

Fraser Brown: Forget *Civ*, folks, *Alpha Centauri* is still the best 4X Firaxis has ever made. The exceptional faction design, unusual setting and simmering sci-fi story have kept this a must-play for decades. Please play it—the drones need you. Few other studios have attempted to continue this mostly-dead evolutionary thread, with the exception of the brilliant *Endless Legend*.



PERSONAL PICK

Evan Lahti



MONSTER TRAIN 2

A more-is-more counterpoint to *Slay the Spire*'s relative austerity in the deckbuilder genre. I love assembling an ugly menagerie of squid women, immortal ooze piles, melting Victorian candle children, actual demons, and mushroom soldiers. Each night I load these weirdos into separate rooms of a three-story train to reclaim heaven. Perfect soundtrack, big replayability, inventive factions, and more content on the way.

PERSONAL PICK

Lincoln Carpenter



EARTH DEFENSE FORCE 5

EDF looks like shit, the voice acting is awful, the developers have been using the same assets since 2006, and it fucking rules. It's a series carried solely by the unembellished truth that it's fun to shoot 6 million giant ants with your friends. It's one of the purest demonstrations that a game need not be pretty to be excellent.

The Top 100

49 PERSONA 5 ROYAL

TOP 100 SCORE 229.27

Mollie Taylor: Atlus continues to milk the Phantom Thieves for all their worth, and for good reason: *Persona 5 Royal* is a truly top-notch JRPG with an excellent cast, banging soundtrack, and meticulously-designed dungeons that put it a step above its predecessors. The *Persona* to play today.

48 FINAL FANTASY X/X-2 HD

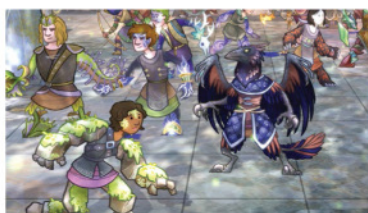
TOP 100 SCORE 229.29

Andrea Shearon: Truly the last *Final Fantasy* of its kind, *FF10* and its sequel bookend an era of series greats that started with *FF6* in the '90s and refused to slow down for decades. The remastered RPG lost some of the original art direction's charm, but Yuna's selfless pilgrimage is Square Enix in its prime.

47 VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES

TOP 100 SCORE 229.85

Ted Litchfield: I always try to sell *Bloodlines* to potential converts as a prototype *New Vegas*, translating the flexible RPG design of 2D *Fallout* to full 3D. But it also delivers an unforgettable atmosphere the likes of which we may never see again in games. A gothic vampire fantasy.



46 WILDERMYTH

RELEASED 2021 | TOP 100 SCORE 231.33

Robin Valentine: It's really remarkable how rich the stories *Wildermyth's* layered systems churn out are, as you travel across the map and fight tense turn-based battles. Characters grow, change, accomplish greatness, suffer hardship, and if they're lucky retire and have children who go on to have their own adventures. And sometimes they get turned into a frog-man.

45 STRAFTAT

RELEASED 2024 | TOP 100 SCORE 232

Evan Lahti: Slapstick *Quake*. *Straftat* is the world's only French 1v1 FPS that features cigarettes as cosmetic DLC, a brutalist playground that you bring variously clownish and exotically violent weapons into. There are an uncountable number of maps: some feel like *Mario Party*, others like a fighter jet duel. A generous July update added 1v1v1v1 and 2v2. Best free FPS on Steam.



44

INTO THE BREACH

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 232.8

Quality 8.20 Importance 7.50 Freshness 6.70

Evan Lahti: This is the most playable turn-based game on PC. Deploying teams of giant robots that move in different chess-piece patterns (appropriately, on an 8x8 grid), *Into the Breach* asks you to defend Earth's few remaining cities from waves of kaiju monsters. The game's achievement is the disproportionate amount of strategic thinking it draws out of the three humble units you control (my favorite is the Judo mech, which suplexes monsters over its head). On Unfair difficulty, every round is a set of

life-or-death decisions against Deep Blue Mothra. Ben Prunty's soundtrack does heavy lifting to make pixel art feel cinematic and somber.

Phil Savage: *Into the Breach's* great trick is telling you exactly what your opponent is about to do. If you can't kill an enemy this turn, maybe you can use your mech squad's abilities to manipulate your foes in such a way that all their attacks miss and nothing is destroyed. That's the dream, but in practice it means a lot of hard choices and sacrifice.

43

THE STANLEY PARABLE: ULTRA DELUXE

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 232.92

Quality 8.13 Importance 7.00 Freshness 7.44

Harvey Randall: Harvey sat down to write a few dozen words about *The Stanley Parable*, but as he put his fingers to his keyboard, he realised it'd be a mighty task indeed to convey how its omnipresent narrator is one of the best running gags in all of videogames. He chose, instead, to write a pale imitation of him, as though it might liven his copy up a bit. Really, he should've mentioned that *The Stanley Parable* is almost singular in how much unapologetic fun it has with its premise, sprinkled with just a touch of existential dread.



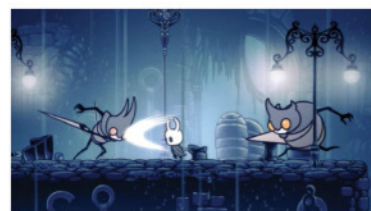
42

KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM

RELEASED 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 233.13

Phil Savage: *Kerbal Space Program* is the perfect distillation of two of my favourite things: space exploration and abject failure. It's a sandbox about building rockets—all complex physics and advanced mathematics—but from the perspective of silly, slapstick critters. The onus is always more on doing than thinking. Slapping together a some parts, shooting your creation into space, and learning from the inevitable.

The joy has always been striving for the next big milestone. Go to space, reach the nearest moon, land on the nearest moon, and so on. Maybe one day I'll even set my sights on the biggest challenge of all: Rescuing the many, many Kerbals that I've left stranded up in space.



41

HOLLOW KNIGHT

RELEASED 2017 | TOP 100 SCORE 233.45

Kara Phillips: I do wonder if the eventual launch of *Silksong* will knock our high praise for *Hollow Knight* down a notch, but let's be real. Nothing will beat that initial feeling of being utterly lost in Hallownest. Or, if you're anything like me, the frustration of frequently failing to beat the Mantis Lords. Seriously, the amount of times I've had to step away from this game.

PERSONAL PICK

*Rich
Stanton*



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: SHREDDER'S REVENGE

My 2025 highlight is my young son's discovery of this game. He's not very good at it, and I'll be damned before I let my kid get battered by the Foot: so I've become great at defending Raphael in co-op, softening up baddies, and annihilating bosses with Radical Mode before they can lay a claw on my boy. Then we high-five, say "Cowabunga!", and start the next level.

PERSONAL PICK

*Phil
Savage*



ANNO 1800

I could lie to you and pretend that my many hours in *Anno 1800* were in pursuit of creating a beautiful Georgian city, taking simple pleasure in the aesthetic thrill of a thriving industrial metropolis. But no, in reality I'm here for the sicko shit: complex production chains pumping out everything from telephones to bowler hats at peak economic efficiency.

40

PILLARS OF ETERNITY 2: DEADFIRE

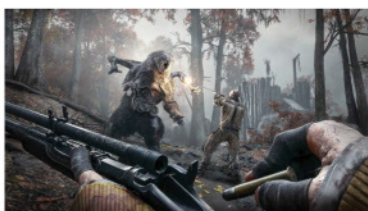
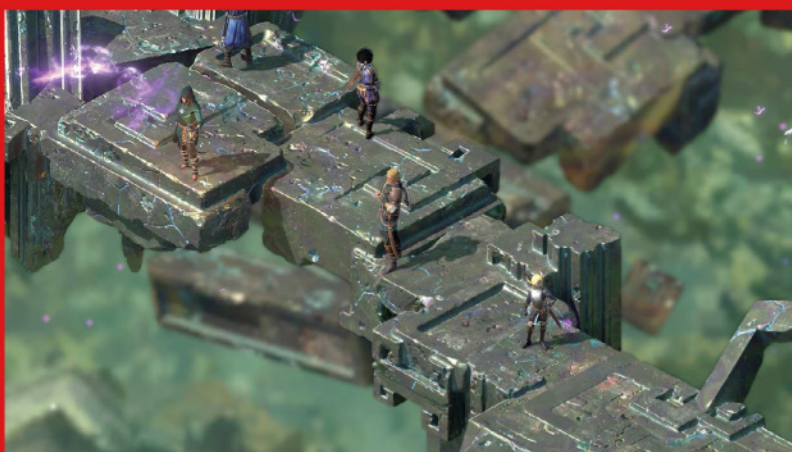
RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 234

Quality 8.83 Importance 5.83 Freshness 6.67

Joshua Wolens: Obsidian made the best CRPG of the last decade in 2018, and then no one played it. The sequel to *Pillars 1* swapped out the OG's Faerûn-style rolling green plains for Caribbean colonialism, putting you smack-bang in the middle of factions competing for the rights to control and exploit the Deadfire region and forcing you to decide which one you can tolerate most. Oh, and you're

pursuing a resurrected god who's inhabited a 300-metre-tall statue that used to live beneath your house. That's also a problem, sure.

Andy Edser: Having put far too many hours into this fantasy pirate simulator feels like having played one of PC gaming's best kept secrets at this point. It's not perfect, but I'd personally rate it higher than the original.



39

HUNT: SHOWDOWN 1896

RELEASED 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 234.32

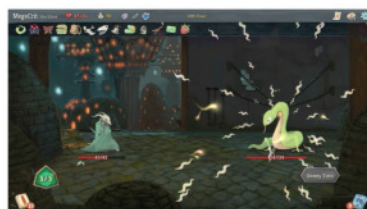
Evan Lahti: What earns this horror-cowboy extraction shooter a recurring spot in the Top 100 is how extraordinarily organic its gunfights are. When you stumble on another team in one of *Hunt*'s forests, it feels truly spontaneous because you used your eyes and ears to find them, not UI. I love the way its generally slow-firing, 1896 weaponset gives firefights rhythm.

38

SLAY THE SPIRE

RELEASED 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 234.58

Harvey Randall: Listen. I know we're all sick of roguelike deckbuilders and that we're tired of diving in for one more run—but you have to give it up for *Slay the Spire*. A game so deliciously moreish that it kicked an entire genre into the stratosphere. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then *Slay the Spire* is being flooded with smutty letters from every indie dev.



37

HITMAN WORLD OF ASSASSINATION

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 234.62

Quality 8.25 Importance 7.65 Freshness 6.71

Fraser Brown: A grand tour of exotic locations filled with terrible people waiting to be creatively murdered. I love it so much that I'm willing to wear a suit to work.

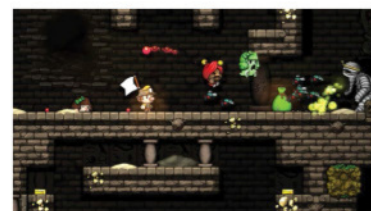
Lincoln Carpenter: What I deeply love about modern *Hitman* is how smoothly it transforms you into a sicko. The signposted mission stories don't just serve up

ideal assassination opportunities. They act as a survey course for later lethal experimentation: You might pass by more wrenches, chef's knives, body dumpsters, and conveniently unattended drinking glasses than you'll need at the moment, but they'll be part of your arsenal when you return for future murders.

36 MAX PAYNE

RELEASED 2001 | TOP 100 SCORE 235

Tyler Wilde: Remedy's classic third-person shooter is such a perfect crystallization of the turn-of-the-millennium action genre: The fixation on slow-motion and flying debris, the comic book influence (before everything credited comics), the sully noir tone that you can't quite call parody, even if it is purposefully too much. Ragdolls went out of fashion too quickly, as did fight scenes in tile-walled subway stations and the sort of fourth-wall-breaking seen in *The Matrix*'s distorted green WB logo and *Max Payne*'s in-character quit screen messages ("I was afraid to go on"). *Max Payne* is a kinetic shooter that is actually a series of very violent puzzles to solve.



35 SPELUNKY

RELEASED 2013 | TOP 100 SCORE 235.04

Evan Lahti: As you descend deeper into this platformer, *Spelunky* makes you feel perpetual precarity. The many randomly-arranged dangers along your path makes reaching its many secrets incredibly sweet. To gain access to the City of Gold, you have to find Egyptian artifacts in painstaking fashion, then die and be resurrected on a specific level in order to discover the entrance.

T100P

2025

34

HADES

RELEASED 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 235.73

Quality 8.20 Importance 7.88 Freshness 6.81

Harvey Randall: A game that's had an impact on roguelikes similar to *Slay the Spire* in terms of heft, *Hades* is basically the platonic ideal of what it is: An isometric action RPG with roguelike elements, polished to a mirror shine. A novel narrative structure, gorgeous artwork, charming voice acting, thoughtfully executed character work, and the unmatched tunes of Darren Korb. I don't know what Supergiant's feeding its composer, but he keeps getting stronger.

Wes Fenton: *Hades* rules, but I think you should actually be playing *Hades 2* right now—it's already bigger and more varied, and includes a grenade launcher that fires flaming demon skulls.

Harvey Randall: Wes, you forgot to mention the siren band that makes a diss track just for you.

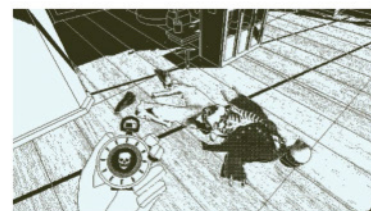


33 PORTAL 2

RELEASED 2011 | TOP 100 SCORE 236.29

Robin Valentine: I can understand why some prefer the purity of the first game, but *Portal 2* just adds so many fantastic, creative ideas to the formula. Puzzles that push the absolute limits of thinking with portals, a genuinely hilarious story, and just so much more to see, do, and play with.

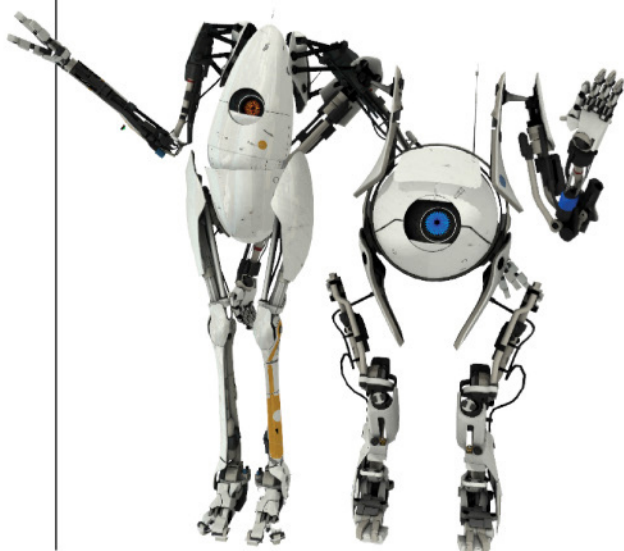
Often overlooked is the multiplayer. For my money, it's one of the best co-op campaigns ever made—if you've never played it, you owe it to yourself to rope in a friend and give it a go. It is precision engineered to create 'A ha!' moments that are so joyful to discover with a partner, fully leveraging the wild potential of not just two portal guns, but the physical presence of two characters.



32 RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN

RELEASED 2018 | TOP 100 SCORE 236.57

Rich Stanton: A mystery game that is actually a mystery, and an environment so densely packed with secrets and discoveries that by the end you feel you've holidayed there. Well, if your holidays involve the unspeakable horrors of the sea. Nothing else looks or plays like *Obra Dinn*, and few games have the confidence to demand as much from players.





31 METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER

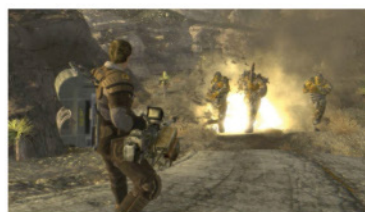
RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 237

Joshua Wolens: Hideo Kojima brings us the most personal story in the entire *Metal Gear* series. Big Boss' origin story is a mad tearjerker about soldiers caught between duty, survival, and a large man who shoots lightning from his fingertips—but it's the doomed relationship between Snake and his mentor, The Boss, that has us coming back to this one decades later.

30 FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

RELEASED 2010 | TOP 100 SCORE 237.36

Joshua Wolens: Rockstar can model all the horse anatomy it wants to, but this is the best cowboy game ever made. The historical storytelling that defines Obsidian started here with a story about a land on the periphery of two empires torn apart as they compete for the right to exploit it. That land is literally Las Vegas, too, which means you get to listen to a load of Rat Pack music.



28 NINE SOLS

TOP 100 SCORE 237.6

Harvey Randall: I finally got my coworkers to play this, and every one had the same reaction I did in 2024: "How'd it take me so long?" *Nine Sols* is an entrant into the *Sekiro*-like genre that utterly flies off the screen. It's beautiful, tightly written, and immaculately designed, despite its dev mostly making horror games.

27 HELLDIVERS 2

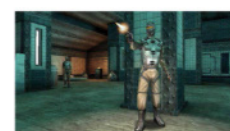
TOP 100 SCORE 237.75

Lincoln Carpenter: Arrowhead Games leveraged physics simulation, orchestral bombast, hyperbolic sociopolitical satire, obsessive attention to ordnance audiovisuals, community-driven metafiction, award-worthy commitment to the bit, and 23 years of expertise in generating slapstick co-op mayhem.

26 DEUS EX

TOP 100 SCORE 250

Jake Tucker: *Deus Ex* endures because it gave players unprecedented freedom. Missions had multiple paths—stealth, hacking, brute force—and making choices between them felt meaningful. Its cyberpunk world was rich, conspiratorial, and eerily prescient. Few games offer such wild, untamed ambition.



29 PENTIMENT

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 237.43

Quality 8.43 Importance 6.71 Freshness 7.57

Fraser Brown: *Pentiment* is one of those rare adventure games that actually make you feel like an investigator—though not necessarily a very good one.

Jody Macgregor: It's something videogames can handle other media would struggle with. You can only do 'Sherlock doesn't know what happened' as comedy on TV, but videogames can play that straight because the protagonist, in this case Andreas the illuminator, is actually just some gamer.

While Andreas is a Renaissance man

in the literal sense, a man who lives in the Renaissance, he's playing detective because he's a literate outsider, not some crime genius. You're investigating murder in a 16th century village without modern forensics or a police badge, and you won't get everything right. You won't even know what you got wrong and just have to send people to be executed based on scraps of evidence and gap-filling guesswork. You're just a little man who looks like marginalia doing his best in the world he finds himself in.

T100P
2025

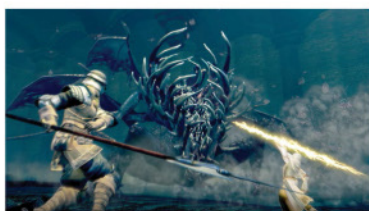
25

DISHONORED 2

RELEASED 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 238.36

Quality 8.50 Importance 7.41 Freshness 6.82

Robert Jones: Whisper it quietly, but *Dishonored 2* is the best immersive sim ever made. The level of control and choice you have in this game to play it your way, and to experiment and get rewarded for your ingenuity, is top tier and takes its replayability to crazy levels. *Dishonored 2* is exceptional for many other reasons, too, such as its beautifully realised world and characters, its jaw-dropping level design (A Crack in the Slab, anyone?), its slick and empowering combat, its mature themes and its engaging narrative that asks you the question: truly, how far would you go to get your revenge?



24 DARK SOULS REMASTERED

RELEASED 2011 | TOP 100 SCORE 239

Lincoln Carpenter: In 2011, FromSoft taught gamers that deliberate attack animations can be fun, and the world was forever changed—largely for the better, if you like parrying stuff. While there's a bit of *Dark Souls* in just about every third person action game now, it's worth revisiting to appreciate just how little FromSoft's design ethos has changed.



23 UNDERTALE

RELEASED 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 239.4

Kara Phillips: A game that always makes you feel the same as when you first played it. The soundtrack, characters, and story as a whole stick with you from the very moment you get your first taste of Butterscotch Pie and beyond. Somehow, everyone I know who's played *Undertale* has somehow perfectly timed it with a time they needed some serious comfort, which is exactly what it offers. If you're ever in need of a good emotional outlet, *Undertale* always has your back.

Morgan Park: An underrated aspect of *Undertale* is its combat, or ideally lack thereof. I love that you can commit to meeting a character's anger with kindness, even if that means taking a heavy beating.

PERSONAL PICK

Tyler Wilde



ZORK: GRAND INQUISITOR

The game that came with my first DVD-ROM drive. It's not too long, contains genuinely good gags, and when the puzzles are BS, they're BS in a funny way. (There's a spell that turns purple things invisible.) They never made another *Zork* game after this one, which is sad, but at least the series went out on a high note.

PERSONAL PICK

Christopher Livingston



THE ELDER SCROLLS 5: SKYRIM

Scandalous that I have to burn my personal pick just to get *Skyrim* in the top 100 conversation! But, I get it. It's dated and creaky and there are so many deeper options for RPGs these days—but *Skyrim*'s sandbox remains unmatched (especially when modded) when it comes to giving you the freedom to create characters and adventures that are truly your own.

22

DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2

RELEASED 2017 | TOP 100 SCORE 239.67

Quality 8.39 Importance 7.72 Freshness 7.06

Ted Litchfield: I'm glad *Original Sin 2* is still on the list, even with its younger sibling ranked higher up—it's not just the game you play after *Baldur's Gate 3* if you want more Larian. Much as I love *The Forgotten Realms* and D&D, Larian's own worldbuilding and bespoke mechanics are something special.

The studio gleefully spits on continuity, spinning a yarn that directly contradicts the events of past *Divinities*, but who cares, nerd? The combat's

focus on stripping enemy defenses while maintaining your own is like no other RPG I've played, and I hope Larian revisits the concept with fresh eyes and hard-won knowledge soon™.

Morgan Park: I have 80.6 hours in *Divinity 2*, and at least 70 of those were spent running Fort Joy across six abandoned playthroughs. I have a soft spot for *Divinity 2*'s chaotic combat where the floor is always lava, but I just keep running out of gas.



21

PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

RELEASED 1999 | TOP 100 SCORE 240.75

Ted Litchfield: *Disco Elysium* may be the gold standard for this type of RPG, but its inspiration still has the juice. I'm in it for the little moments in this story of an amnesiac immortal, like paying your past self's bar tab to get the eyeball he left as collateral, then gruesomely gouging out your current eye to plop in the old one, unlocking buried memories.

20

MINECRAFT

RELEASED 2011 | TOP 100 SCORE 241.04

Elie Gould: I still can't get over how *Minecraft* managed to make a mundane act of hitting rocks so much fun that it's still going strong over a decade later. As the dedicated rock smasher on any server I'm in, I approve this message.

Morgan Park: A *Minecraft* server with friends (and mods!) is still one of the great PC gaming experiences.



The Top 100

19 THIEF GOLD

TOP 100 SCORE 241.2

Jody Macgregor: You'll have to remap the controls and be aware some missions added in this edition aren't as good as the originals, but quibbles aside, *Thief* is still top-tier stealth. The levels are diverse yet never gimmicky, something others in the genre could learn from. A film-noir fantasy thriller.

18 PREY

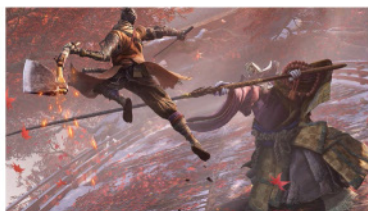
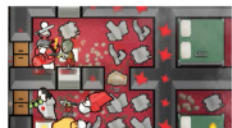
TOP 100 SCORE 242.62

Joshua Wolens: Kinda weird how someone's out there making *System Shock 3* when *Arkane* already made it. *Prey* is a special thing: a jumble of systems and pathways that's more than happy to let you pick your own, strange route through it. It's not as tight as *Dishonored*, but it makes it up with its incredible openness.

17 RIMWORLD

TOP 100 SCORE 244

Andy Edser: I'd like to write about *Rimworld*'s intricate dance of systems, its chaotic yet beautiful, ballet-like emergence, but I'd be doing it an injustice. The reason I play *Rimworld* is to see which of my colonists will eat each other first—and that's a compliment. It's a gripping post-apocalyptic hell sim.



16 SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE

RELEASED 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 244.36

Harvey Randall: I'm smug beyond belief that we ranked this above *Dark Souls* this year. The *Souls* that launched a thousand -likes will always sleep easy in my git-gud heart, but *Sekiro* is peerless. From's RPGs offer build expression, but if you've not played *Sekiro* you haven't seen what it can do when it narrows its focus to a honed, thrice-folded nippon edge.

15 HALF-LIFE 2

RELEASED 2004 | TOP 100 SCORE 255.42

Robert Jones: Despite starting to creak somewhat, with many of its once-pioneering qualities since built on and, occasionally, improved on by subsequent games, there's no doubting that *Half-Life 2* remains an FPS of immense quality, replayability and foresight. Yes, it lacks the incredible opening of the original *Half-Life*, but it then delivers a stronger overall game.



14

BALDUR'S GATE 2: ENHANCED

RELEASED 2000 | TOP 100 SCORE 244.8

Quality 8.90 Importance 8.40 Freshness 5.70

Robert Jones: Every time I hear David Warner deliver the lines of Jon Irenicus, *Baldur's Gate 2*'s incredibly memorable villain, I get chills, as it sums up the immense quality that pours forth out of this game at all moments. From defiant statements such as, 'I cannot be caged. I cannot be controlled. Understand this as you die', through to philosophical musings on the meaning of existence, such as, 'Life... is strength. That is not to be contested; it seems logical enough. You live; you affect your world', and onto

despair-laden realisations like, 'I... I do not remember your love, Ellesime. I have tried to. I have tried to recreate it, to spark it anew in my memory. But it is gone... a hollow, dead thing', I remember why, until *Baldur's Gate 3*, this game was the greatest fantasy RPG ever made. Incredibly smart, epic in scale, and nearly infinite in replayability, *Baldur's Gate 2* remains a singular gaming experience that grips you with its narrative, characters and systems before never letting you go. Legendary.

13

KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE 2

RELEASED 2025 | TOP 100 SCORE 245.5

Quality 8.50 Importance 7.42 Freshness 8.00

Andy Edser: I can't remember the last time a game made me grin this hard during its intro sequence. Oh, yes I can. I would have been a teenager, full of youthful vigour, untarnished by the horrors of reality. Speaking of which, *Kingdom Come Deliverance 2* brings such a hefty dose of crunchy, faux-medieval realism to its RPG mix, it comes out smelling of onions and turnips. It delivers unforgiving yet easy-enough-to-master combat, dialogue that sounds like real people might have said it, and an open world that feels genuinely reactive and immersive.

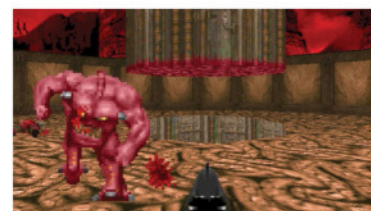


12 XCOM 2

RELEASED 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 246

Jody Macgregor: Turn-based tactics don't get better. The complex strategy layer means you're not sure if you've screwed up by diverting to rescue a squaddie instead of chasing alloy for an upgrade, and the missions turn on a dime by introducing new enemies you're not ready for or springing a cluster of aliens on you at the worst time. Beginning in stealth gives you confidence, then you turn a corner and it's brutally ripped away.

Wes Fenlon: *War of the Chosen* is an essential addition, adding some truly hateable villains and narrative stakes to the original game. Nothing since has nailed this combination of strategic tension and Star Trek actors mocking you for missing a 90% shot.



11 DOOM (1993)

RELEASED 1993 | TOP 100 SCORE 246.03

Robert Jones: The forever FPS. The FPS you take with you to the desert island. Whether it was the creative brilliance of John Romero, the technical wizardry of John Carmack, or the pioneering spirit of the entire id Software team, back in 1993 gaming history was made, and it continues to be made today thanks to *Doom's* incredible mod community.

PERSONAL PICK

Andrea Shearon



NORCO

Not that you need to look much further than your daily newsfeed for AI-gone-mad horror stories and reports from a crumbling gig economy, but allow me to recommend the game that tried to warn us all—*Norco*. It's eight hours of point-and-click adventuring through a grungy, southern gothic hellscape that feels a little too familiar to be a dystopian tale of caution.

PERSONAL PICK

Morgan Park



SKIN DEEP

Skin Deep landed at 123 in our voting, which should tell you how much we liked it. Blendo Games took seven years to make its ambitious immersive sim about rescuing cats from space pirates, and it was worth the wait. *Skin Deep* has pure systems-driven fun that lets you solve problems in accidentally genius ways. One time I dodged a bullet that broke a window, triggering a decompression that killed everyone on the ship but me.

10

RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

RELEASED 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 246.32

Quality 8.67 Importance 8.32 Freshness 6.74

Phil Savage: The most lavish open world in all of PC gaming—*Red Dead Redemption 2* is a stunningly beautiful game, both for the majestic scale of its environments, and the intricate detail packed inside of them. There's a good story here—it's the rare Rockstar game that doesn't default to cynicism, satire and cruelty as its central themes, even though you'll find plenty of all three from its cast of characters. But when I look back on my time with it, it's the journeys

that I'll always remember, not the destination. The joy of wandering its world, discovering the sights and stories that take place between the missions.

Kara Phillips: It is simply one of the greatest games to ever exist, regardless of whether or not you used to run around your backyard playing cowboys with your friends and family. If you want fast, gunslinging combat, it's there. If you want to just ride around on the back of your horse spotting wildlife, it's there too.



9 ELDEN RING

RELEASED 2022 | TOP 100 SCORE 246.6

Wes Fenlon: Thinking about replaying FromSoftware's massive open world action RPG exhausted me at one point, but thanks to the fantastic Seamless Co-op mod I realized how much of the game is elegantly designed to be skippable. It's a decadent buffet of dungeons and boss fights to feast on, while its expansion *Shadow of the Erdtree* is a Michelin-caliber prix fixe.

8 BALATRO

RELEASED 2024 | TOP 100 SCORE 248.1

Robin Valentine: You really have to play *Balatro* to understand what makes it so vital. Those unassuming looks—'what, it's just looking for poker hands?'—disguise an absolute rabbit hole of roguelike strategy and wild, creative build-crafting. It reveals itself to you in exquisite layers—your best run 5 hours in is nothing compared to your best build 20 hours in.



T100P
2025

7

CAVES OF QUD

RELEASED 2024 | TOP 100 SCORE 248.2

Quality 8.40 Importance 7.50 Freshness 8.67

Lincoln Carpenter: *Caves of Qud* is a tile-based roguelike in the same way that a horse is descended from a sort of shrew: The statement's technically correct, but it doesn't quite capture the mystifying contours and inscrutable affect on display. *Qud* is better understood as a procedural conjurer of deep future fever dreams—of bird-worshipping wasteland villages and their alligator mayors, of marble-skinned warrior-clones entombed in centuries-long subterranean slumber, of chairs that can be people with an application of Spray-a-Brain. Whether I'm bristling with surplus limbs and psionic weaponry on a triumphant run or simply inspecting furniture flavour text, *Qud* is a showcase of stylistic and systemic artistry.



6

STARDEW VALLEY

RELEASED 2016 | TOP 100 SCORE 249.08

Elie Gould: A beacon of feel-good cosy goodness, *Stardew Valley* has managed to retain its position as one of the most influential indie games for almost a decade now. Its warm vibes, whimsical characters, and beautiful locations all cobble together to make a farming sim which is at times almost impossible to put down. I've been working on my Cherrytree Farm for about seven years and going about my daily business is just as exciting and fun as ever.

Kara Phillips: It's impossible to not praise the game that inspired every second release to involve some sort of farming mechanics. Yet, despite all the farming simulators I've spent an ungodly amount of time playing, this is still top.



5

CRUSADER KINGS 3

RELEASED 2020 | TOP 100 SCORE 253.33

Fraser Brown: The best way to experience the medieval world—if the experience you want involves chasing perverts out of your bedroom, murdering family members and alcoholism. *Crusader Kings 3* is much more than a strategy game—it's a hugely elaborate RPG, a centuries-long life sim and a platform for so many impressive mods.

T100P

2025



4

THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

RELEASED 2015 | TOP 100 SCORE 259.5

Quality 9.04

Importance 9.00

Freshness 7.13

Wes Fenlon: It's somehow been a decade since *The Witcher 3* changed our expectations for RPGs, but it sure doesn't feel like it. How many games since have had sidequests as clever or funny as A Greedy God, in which a couple dummies have been duped into thinking a gluttonous monster is their god? Or a protagonist with as strong a sense of history in their world as Geralt, yet still malleable in the moments you make key choices? Maybe just one, and it's ranked higher on this list. Play it again and discover a new killer quest.

3

DWARF FORTRESS

RELEASED 2006 | TOP 100 SCORE 261.43

Quality 9.00

Importance 8.57

Freshness 8.00

Lincoln Carpenter: I started playing *Dwarf Fortress* sometime in 2010, and since then I've forgotten more about the dwarven histories I've witnessed than most people will ever learn about our own. I've watched goblin sieges broken by one-armed wrestlers, grief-maddened kings sealed in their throne rooms, failed aqueduct projects leading to food riots, and more. It's a testament to the sprawling intricacy of *Dwarf Fortress*'s fantasy simulation that the 15 years we spent with half-functional marksdwarves—now fixed, thanks to a recent patch—was barely a footnote to the endless toil, tragedy, and turmoil of dwarven existence.

It's an incomparable storytelling engine of absurd complexity, modeling everything from geologic erosion to nerve tissue damage to feline alcohol poisoning. With any luck, I'll still be playing it in 2040.





2

DISCO ELYSIUM

RELEASED 2019 | TOP 100 SCORE 267.16

Quality 9.21 Importance 8.53 Freshness 8.37

Joshua Wolens: No game has ever captured the malaise of the end of history better. *Disco Elysium's* Revachol is a city stuck in neutral, ruled over not by a singular tyrant but by the distant dictates of drab men of finance, who spill more blood with a signature than even the most industrious dictator could with a firing squad. Its people are bleary-eyed, ignored, and exploited in a kind of maddeningly abstract way—they know no future but rather an interminable present, a neverending process of things getting inevitably worse.

Until someone goes and blows away a mercenary hired by the Wild Pines corporation, anyway, at which point all the quiet, tinderbox contradictions that define Revachol

threaten to catch alight and engulf it. Suddenly the city where every possible future has been tried and foreclosed is forced to lurch into something new, just like the bloated, self-destructing drunk you play as. I'm not sure a more 21st-century game has, or could be made.

Fraser Brown: I am a speed-addicted cop with a drinking problem, my best friend thinks I'm an idiot, I've lost my gun, my car and

my badge, I keep trying to eat the rich and I think I can see ghosts. My necktie talks to me. Unrelated: *Disco Elysium* is very good.

Harvey Randall: *Disco Elysium* is a masterfully-written piece of art. It manages to be hilarious, harrowing, uplifting, and depressing all at once. Once moment you're cracking up at Harry DuBois bellowing about an "ice cop-hat fuck show"; the next your heart softens as he's treated with understanding by people who've all already lived the worst days of their lives, and are expecting so many more. Also, Kim Kitsuragi is the best companion character in any RPG, bar none. He is an anchor point in the universe, the perfect platonic ideal of that guy. He is, always has been, and will continue to be Him.

I AM A SPEED-ADDICTED COP WITH A DRINKING PROBLEM



A masterfully-written piece of art. Play it.

T100P

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1

BALDUR'S GATE 3

RELEASED 2023 | TOP 100 SCORE 267.64

Quality 9.04

Importance 8.96

Freshness 8.54

Robert Jones: The best fantasy RPG of all time. A game of such staggering complexity, flexibility, fun and beauty, that no matter who you are or how you play it, *Baldur's Gate 3* will leave an emotional mark on you. What Larian Studios achieved with *Baldur's Gate 3* is already legendary, with the game scooping up every single award going following its release, as well as topping countless lists just like this. But, let me tell you, its legend is only going to grow further as time passes. *Baldur's Gate 3* is a game that will go on to influence so many more games yet to come, a game whose impact on the video game industry will be as keenly felt as when *Doom* released, or *Deus Ex* or, yes, even its mighty predecessor, *Baldur's Gate 2*. I can't wait to see what the future holds.

Harvey Randall: I mean... c'mon, are we really surprised this one's here? The good ship PC Gamer is a flotilla of varying tastes, but the one thing we tend to have in common most of all is that we all love a bloomin' good RPG. *Baldur's Gate 3* is an utter masterclass, hard-earned by Larian's multiple brushes

with bankruptcy and years of making increasingly good CRPGs. Swen Vincke and co. wandered out into a field with a bottle, stared at a thundercloud with full confidence, and let the lightning come to them—hitting the D&D renaissance right at its apex.

Compliments need to go to the game's writing, as well. Not since

BALDUR'S GATE 3 WILL LEAVE AN EMOTIONAL MARK ON YOU

Origins have we seen a cast of characters so well-fleshed out, distinct, and realised. Even Wyll (who I think gets dunked on far too often, IMHO) is only a little less golden because he's standing on the pantheon with some all-timers. That the game allows you to miss, kill, or betray any of them shows a ton of confidence in its insim vision.

I also don't want to let it go unspoken that Larian's post-launch

support has turned this game from "just excellent" to an all-timer. New subclasses, difficulty modes, and an honest-to-Bhaal epilogue that turned its slightly-wobbly, hurried-feeling ending into a perfect series of capstones.

Fraser Brown: *Baldur's Gate 3* is one of the few games where I think the 160 hours I spent reviewing it was time well spent. It consumed my every waking moment for weeks and I loved every second of it, giving it the highest score we've ever given a game in the history of PC Gamer (at least in the UK). A landmark review for a landmark game.

Andrea Shearon: Unlike Fraser, I do not have a good excuse for my embarrassingly long *Baldur's Gate 3* playtime. Steam says I've put over 400 hours into Larian's behemoth RPG, but it does not indicate how much of that was time spent rotating my Tav and Karlach around like a rotisserie chicken. Since I got so into modding, I'm gonna say I wracked up at least half of that in the character creator. The other half was time exceedingly well spent petting Scratch and arguing (flirting?) with my brain worm.



Baldur's Gate 3 will
consume your life,
and you'll love it.

CATEGORICALLY CORRECT

You've seen the full list, but who were the big winners in our individual voting categories?

QUALITY SIMPLY THE TEAM'S FAVOURITE GAMES		
POSITION	GAME	SCORE
1	DISCO ELYSIUM	9.21
2	BALDUR'S GATE 3	9.04
3	THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT	9.04
4	CRUSADER KINGS 3	9.00
5	DWARF FORTRESS	9.00

IMPORTANCE THE MOST INFLUENTIAL IN PC GAMING HISTORY		
POSITION	GAME	SCORE
1	DOOM (1993)	9.90
2	WORLD OF WARCRAFT	9.82
3	MINECRAFT	9.82
4	HALF-LIFE 2	9.43
5	FORTNITE	9.35

FRESHNESS A CELEBRATION OF NEW AND NOVEL IDEAS		
POSITION	GAME	SCORE
1	CAVES OF QUD	8.67
2	BALDUR'S GATE 3	8.54
3	BLUE PRINCE	8.50
4	DISCO ELYSIUM	8.37
5	STRAFTAT	8.33

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